

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Semi-Monthly—By Subscription \$1.25 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the N. Y. Post office by Frank Tousey.

No. 4.

NEW YORK, February 23, 1898.

Price 5 Cents.

RAILROAD RALPH THE BOY ENGINEER.

BY JAS. C. MERRITT.



Ralph has a red flag with him, and seizing hold of the standard with one hand, he waves the danger signal violently with the other, at the same time shouting to the engineer of the other train to stop.



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RAILROAD RALPH, THE BOY ENGINEER.

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CHAPTER I.

THE TWO CHUMS—CLIF'S PROPOSITION.

"Ralph!"

"Well?"

"Come here."

"What for? I'm housing my engine."

"Don't do it yet."

"No? Are there any orders?"

"Yes."

"From the super?"

"Correct."

"That settles it. So here goes on the steam, off come the brakes, and here I am. What's the matter?"

"Mr. Merritt will tell you that."

"Where is he?"

"In the telegraph office."

"Then here goes on the side track, bound for the telegraph office, pursuant to special order number sixteen hundred."

The young man called Ralph, who had looked up from his work when he heard his name called, and had approached the platform where the station agent stood, now made his way through the station until he came to the telegraph window, and nodding to the operator, said pleasantly:

"Will you tell Mr. Merritt that I am here, if he wants to see me?"

"Ah, Ralph, is that you?" said a voice from within. "Step right inside; I'll be free in a moment."

He was as good as his word, for Ralph had no sooner pushed open the wicket and entered the little office, than Mr. Merritt said, drawing a chair toward his own:

"Sit down, Ralph. Never mind your working clothes; I am not ashamed of them, for I wore just such myself once."

Ralph sat down, and Mr. Merritt drew his chair up close to that occupied by the young engineer, and bending forward, said gravely:

"There is trouble ahead on the road, Ralph, and I want you to take the wildcat and investigate it."

"What is the nature of it, sir?"

"You have heard of Jack Friel?"

"The train wrecker and outlaw? Often."

"He and his gang have been operating in this region lately, and from what I can learn, I fear that an attempt will be made to destroy the bridge over Swift river, and rob the passengers in the confusion."

"Wreck the bridge right out?"

"No, but disable it so that when a train goes across it will break

down. The water is not deep at that point, you know, and it will be an easy matter to rob the cars and the passengers after the accident."

"They might break the bridge down, and when the train stopped, rush their gang aboard and get to work in lively style."

"Possibly."

"And you want me to run out and see if the bridge is all safe?"

"Yes; you can take your engine merely and go down if you think you can manage it. If it becomes necessary you can abandon it."

"Do you want me to go to-night?"

"I can't tell yet. I may want—"

At that moment the operator stepped up, and said:

"A message has just come for you, Mr. Merritt, from the station agent at the switch just beyond Swift river."

"What does he say?"

"That it is believed Friel is in this city and that his gang have dispersed."

"That may be a blind. Come around again, Ralph, at nine o'clock. You'd better keep your fires up so that you can get steam on in a short time."

"I'll keep a small head on until I see you again."

"Very well. I can probably let you know when you come again what I intend to do."

"All right, sir. Good-evening."

Ralph Wright was an engineer on the Southeastern Railroad, which ran from a point in Northwestern Missouri, which we shall call Bradford for convenience, south-east to Pawnee, a distance of about three hundred miles.

He did not run any particular train, but took out the extras and specials, known as "wildcats" by railroad men, and in that way had acquired the name of Wildcat Ralph, but was better known as Railroad Ralph, although it was not inappropriate upon other accounts, the young fellow being as fearless and as tough in a fight as the animal from which the extra trains received their name.

Ralph was nineteen, strong and lithe, handsome and manly in bearing, courteous and winning in his manner, strong, brave and fearless, and a general favorite with all who knew him.

Mr. Merritt was the general superintendent of the road, and reposed great confidence in the young man, trusting him with many difficult missions, and confiding matters of the utmost importance to him, having rightly judged that the latter was entirely worthy of the trust reposed in him.

When Ralph left the office he attended to his engine, and was about to walk up the track toward the street, when someone called him.

"Ralph?"

"Hello!" he answered, looking in the direction of the voice.

He saw a young fellow, a friend of his, who was a clerk in the offices of the railroad company, and halting, he awaited the other's approach.

"Hallo, Clif, what's the matter?" he asked. "You look excited."

"Do I?" said the other, flushing. "Oh, I've been walking fast; I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Had your supper?"

"No."

"Then come with me to Bryce's. We can get a rattling steak there, the best in the city."

"You've switched me upon the right track this time, Clif, so get on the turn-table, face about and off we go, side and side."

Clifford Wayne had been an old school chum of Ralph's, and at that time the boys had been devotedly attached to one another, though of late years they had not seen so much of each other as formerly.

Ralph was on the road a great deal, and often at night and during the day Clif was at work in the office, so that it was only occasionally that the boys saw each other nowadays.

Clif was disposed to be somewhat wild, indulging in many practices which he might better have let alone, while Ralph was as steady as a clock, and though no preacher, was not altogether satisfied with the way his old friend and schoolmate was traveling, and frequently told him so. Clif was a high-spirited, independent sort of a fellow, and Ralph, not caring to have any fuss, had never said very much about his wild ways, though he had always declined, upon the plea of being too busy, when asked to go off on a lark with the young nob.

They reached Bryce's chop-house in a short time, and, taking seats in a little curtained box, gave their orders.

When the steaks, smoking hot and savory, were placed before them, Clif said:

"I'm going to have some hot brandy and water, Ralph; what's yours?"

"Coffee, if it's not and strong."

"Oh, nonsense, have something good; take a smash."

"I always avoid smashes in my business," replied Ralph with a laugh. "No, I always have run my engine on water, and I guess I'd better keep it up."

"You never do take a drink with me."

"Nor with anyone else, old man, so you're no worse off than the rest of my friends."

"Oh, well, suit yourself, you always were an odd stick."

When the waiter had finally left them, Clif said suddenly, pitching into his steak:

"Do you want to make a big pile of stamps, Ralph?"

"I'm agreeable."

"Then I'll tell you how to do it. You know that this road and two or three others have been cutting rates like the dickens lately?"

"And cutting each other's throats, too. It's ruinous. I tell you a man can't afford to give you a quarter's worth for a nickel, and it doesn't pay to reduce rates so much."

"It runs the other fellows off the track, though."

"And takes away all your own profits."

"Oh, well; we won't discuss that part of the business. There will be a compromise made the first of next week, and then the old rates will prevail."

"The public don't know it yet."

"But I do, for I heard the whole business talked up between Merritt and our fellows, and the ducks of the other road. I had a good stand, and I just listened and heard every word. It's all settled, and the former state of things will be in vogue again after Tuesday next."

"But do you think—"

"Now, my plan is this: Suppose a fellow, knowing of this proposed change, were to buy up several thousand dollars' worth of tickets at the present rate, hold on to 'em, and sell 'em again at an advance."

"He would realize heavily."

"Suppose he could get them for nothing, and sell 'em to the station agents at present prices, giving them the chance to make something, wouldn't he make still?"

"Yes, but—"

"Suppose he had ten thousand dollars' worth of these tickets, and should rush them all over the West at a considerable advance, or even at present rates, with the understanding that he was to get something additional from each of his customers?"

"There is a fortune in it, certainly; but I am afraid—"

"I know just where there is a box of these tickets to the value of ten thousand dollars, and I can lay my hand on 'em as easily as I can take up my knife. They are in the safe—the small one, not the big one—in the vault, and I've got the combination."

"Good Heavens, Clif, you don't—"

"I can enter the office at any time without exciting suspicion. I can take out these tickets, give 'em to you, and, as you run all over the road, let you distribute them in small lots to the men on the list which I shall give you. My vacation begins to-morrow, and I could go with you and help you without being missed."

"What? Make me a party to the thing?" cried Ralph, in consternation.

"Certainly; I always help my friends when I get hold of a good thing. It will be the making of both of us, and if we don't squeal there won't be the ghost of a chance of finding it out."

"I won't have a thing to do with it," said Ralph, emphatically, "and I advise you as a friend to let it alone."

As he said these words, a man in the next box, who with his ears pressed close to the partition, had heard every word that had passed, looked back and thought to himself:

"The pious young hypocrite. He'll spoil the whole business."

"But there's a good thing for us in it," rejoined Clif.

"Are you aware that you are asking me to commit a crime?" answered Ralph, in icy tones.

"Nonsense! It ain't stealing to take from a railroad company. If you were a conductor, now, you'd talk different. I'll bet that you and the other engineers levy on them as it is."

"There's nothing more to be said," getting up from his seat. "You have made a mistake in me, Clif. You have got upon the wrong line entirely, and I advise you to switch off."

"I suppose you'll give the whole thing away now?"

"No one but an old friend would dare say that," answered Ralph, hotly.

"And you won't go into it?"

"No, and if you do you'll ruin your good name forever. You may make a heap of money now, but it will burn in your pocket and drag you down to ruin. Is it worth that?"

Ralph talked in the same strain for some time, and at last Clif said:

"Make your mind easy, Ralph, I've given the thing up. You're right, and it won't pay."

CHAPTER II.

THE OUTLAW AND THE CLERK—THE ROBBERY.

SHORTLY after that Ralph bade his friend good-night and started off for the station, Clif remaining behind.

"That's all very well," he said to himself, after Ralph had left. "I can't depend upon him, that's plain to be seen, but I'm going to make a raise for all that."

"And I'll help you," said a voice.

Clif turned quickly, and saw a well-dressed but evil-looking man standing close beside him.

There was not light enough in the street for him to see the man's face clearly, or he would have observed a malicious look upon it, but the voice did not impress him favorably, and he said, with a slight start:

"What's that?"

"I say I'll help you."

"What about?"

"Making a raise."

"I don't understand."

"Ho, ho, you're fly, are you? About the tickets, you know. I'll help you to dispose of them."

"What tickets?" asked Clif, beginning to feel alarmed.

"Oh, you know what. You needn't be afraid of me, for I'm solid. I won't give the snap away, and if there's any trouble I can put the brassies on the wrong track, make 'em think there were burglars around."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind now. I know the whole business," and in a few words the man convinced Clif that such was the fact, adding quickly:

"You get the stuff out and I'll help you to scatter it. We'll go shares. I had the same sort of scheme on hand myself, but didn't hope to have such good luck as getting hold of an insider to help me work it."

"How do I know you won't rob me of the whole lot when I get them out?"

"You act square with us, and we'll do the same by you."

"Oh, you have associates, then?" said Clif, quickly.

"Only my brother. He and I work together always. We'll both swear to do the square thing. I've got lots of points I can give you."

Then the stranger mentioned several clever ways of disposing of the tickets quietly, which Clif had not thought of, and the young fellow saw at once that he was a master hand.

"You did wrong to tell that young fellow about it," he said, "but I don't know after all, because he is square, and if you tell him not to say anything about it, he won't. If he gives his word he'll keep it."

"That's Ralph every time. He must not know I have the stuff."

"Of course not; you can tell him you have nought better of the matter, and ask him to say nothing."

"He'll be as dumb as an oyster if I ask him to keep quiet."

"Oh, you can humbug him," said the other. "You're smarter than he is, and you'll be able to pull the wool over his eyes. I have known you for a long time, and I was sure from the start that you were game."

All this and more to the same purpose did the wily flatterer pour into Clif's ear, gradually worming himself into the young fellow's confidence as they walked along, and finally inviting him in to have a bottle of wine.

Over the wine they talked and chatted, the stranger skillfully plying his comrade with wine, praising his cleverness, telling him how smart he was, picturing the wealth that both would soon enjoy, and adroitly spreading his net so that there should be no chance of escape.

Clif became excited and soon his good intentions flew to the winds; all traces of better feeling which Ralph had awakened vanished like smoke, and he was thoroughly *en rapport* with his villainous comrade, and swore to enter, hand and glove, with him in the scheme to rob the company and make a fortune.

"I'll get in to-night," he said at length, "collar the plunder, and meet you in the morning."

"At six o'clock, daybreak, I'll be on hand with the buggy, and we'll streak it out on the road at once."

"All right; count on me."

Nine o'clock was striking from the spires of Brandford when Ralph entered the station and asked for Mr. Merritt.

"Ah, Ralph, on time as usual," said the superintendent. "Always up to time, I see."

"The rule of the road, sir," answered Ralph. "Many a life has been lost by the delay of a minute."

"Quite right, Ralph; there's nothing like punctuality. Not to flatter you, Ralph, you're the steadiest man on the whole line."

"Any news from up the road, sir?" asked Ralph, smiling.

"No, or at least nothing that calls for immediate action."

"Then you won't want the wildcat to-night?"

"No, not to-night, but I shall want you to have steam up shortly after five to-morrow."

"Very well, sir."

"Shall I have a caller sent to your house?"

"No, thanks; I'll have the thing upon my mind and will be sure to wake up. If there's nothing more I'll take a stroll and then turn in."

"Nothing more, Ralph. I'll be going up myself presently, and when you get through with your engine drop in and we'll go along together."

Half an hour later Ralph and the superintendent passed the offices, where a dim light was burning, and Mr. Merritt said:

"How would you like being in there, Ralph, in preference to running up and down the road?"

"I'd rather take the road—there's more freedom."

"There's a friend of yours in the office, but we're not altogether satisfied with him, and I could make a vacancy if you cared to take it."

"Do you mean Clif Wayne?"

"Yea."

"You'd better try him a little bit longer, sir, for I am sure he means well. I'll speak to him myself."

"If you recommend him, Ralph, that's enough, and I shall be glad to give him another chance."

"I wish you would, sir," said Ralph, as they passed by.

Had he known that at that very moment the young man in whose behalf he was speaking was hidden behind a safe in the office awaiting his time to rob the company, he might not have bestirred himself so actively, but suffered matters to take their own course.

Eleven o'clock chimed out full and clear from the church spires, and the young man behind the safe arose and looked carefully about him.

Creeping to the window he peered out, taking care that he should not be seen.

The guardian of the night passed at that moment, and rapped sharply on the pavement.

"All's well," meant that rap, but what a mockery it was, it being anything but all well in the office at that moment.

There were people in the street yet, and Clif knew there was still time enough, so creeping away from the window, he lay down upon a sofa in the secretary's room and waited.

Twelve o'clock struck and found him fast asleep; one o'clock barely roused him, but when two o'clock sounded he was on his feet in an instant.

He waited until the watchman had passed, and then going to the safe, kneeled down before it and began to work.

He was nervous and excited, and could not work to the best advantage, so, arising, he went into the president's room, where he knew there was a decanter of fine old brandy, and helped himself to a couple of glasses.

He broke open the president's desk, to make it appear as though burglars had entered, scattered the papers around, left a box of cigars on the table, lighting one and throwing it half smoked upon the carpet, overturned the decanter, and otherwise confused things, so as to make it appear as if half a dozen men had been there.

He made the same confusion in the other rooms, and by this time it was three o'clock, and he was well prepared for the desperate work he had on hand.

It was the work of a few minutes to open the safe and take out the tin box containing the tickets, which he put upon the floor beside him.

Opening it, to see that its contents were all right, he shut and locked it, and then closed the safe, changing the combination in order to baffle those that came to open it in the morning.

"That's all right," he muttered. "I'm fly, I am, and nobody will be the wiser. There's nothing like making a big stroke and have done with it. If I stole a hundred dollars I'd get jugged for it; but when a man makes a big haul he's called a financier, and gets his name in the papers."

Then Clif lay down upon another sofa, after fortifying himself with an additional drink and a smoke, scratched the door of the vault, as if an attempt had been made upon that, and then waited for the hour to arrive when he could leave.

How the moments dragged now that he had that weight of guilt upon his soul, how the very striking of the clock seemed to accuse him.

"Thief—thief—thief!" it said, slowly and solemnly.

Even the tread of the night watchman, as he passed upon his rounds, seemed to ring out upon the pavement the same words:

"Thief—thief—thief!"

The beating of his heart echoed the same refrain, the whistling of the wind outside repeated it again and again, the very walls seemed to shout it, and the air was full of the sound—

"THIEF!"

Four o'clock had long struck, and Clif could stand it no longer, fearing to go mad if he remained alone another hour.

He took the box from the floor, wrapped it up in a heavy sheet of paper, thrust it under his arm, and prepared to make his exit.

As he reached the outer door, and was preparing to open it, he heard voices just outside.

"We'd better not trust him, Jack," said one. "He might undertake to give us the slip."

"I'll keep my eye on him," said another voice, which Clif recog-

nized as that of his tempter of the previous night. "Jack Friel knows how to fix these young fellows if they go back on him."

Jack Friel!

It was the noted outlaw then with whom Clif had been in conference?

There were more than two men outside, as he knew by the sound, and without a doubt they would rob him when he came out, and he would reap no benefit whatever from his crime.

"I'll outwit 'em," he muttered, and taking the tickets from the box, he made a bundle of them, and tucked them under his coat, carrying the empty box in his hand.

Going to one of the side windows he raised it carefully, and putting his head out, whispered:

"I say, you are early, aren't you?"

"No, I said five o'clock just before I went away. Got the swag?"

"Yes, catch it, and wait till I come down."

Then tossing out the box, which he had stuffed with waste paper, he closed the window, and running down quickly, opened the door and slipped out.

One of the men had discovered the deceit, however, and he cried out, hastening after the fugitive:

"He's cheated us! Catch him, boys. He mustn't escape!"

Ralph was just ready to start out, having gotten up steam and sitting in the cab awaiting the signal, when he saw a figure come flying down the track, pursued by four villainous-looking men.

It was Clif, and under his arm was a suspicious-looking bundle.

In a moment he had leaped into the cab, and sinking down upon the seat, gasped out:

"I couldn't resist the temptation, Ralph. These men are of Jack Friel's gang, and would rob me. Save me and I will make restitution."

The throttle was thrown wide open, the lever shoved into place, and with a snort the engine bowled along the track, leaving the discomfited outlaws far behind, venting their impotent rage in curses and shaking their clenched fists at the fugitive.

CHAPTER III.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

"How did you come to do it, Clif?" asked Ralph, after they had gone about a mile.

"Well, I couldn't help myself somehow or other, and I gave way. I am sorry now, and I wish the thing was back in the office."

To do the young man justice, he was sincere for the moment, and really felt what he said, though there was no telling how soon he might turn around again, particularly if he got the unlucky package into his possession.

Ralph had taken it from the bench where it had fallen when Clif entered the cab, and had put it away securely in a locker, where it now remained.

Our hero was fully aware of the vacillating character of his friend, and was determined to restore the packet without letting it get into Clif's hands, and in a manner that would throw no suspicion upon the real thief, whom he had resolved to shield in order that he might have still another chance to mend his ways.

"We've got to make the bridge and the switch beyond it," he said, presently, "before Lewis comes down on his train. He will stop, I presume, for I have telegraphed him that I am coming."

"Lewis? That is the fellow that goes on those awful drunks occasionally, is it not?"

"Yes, and that is the only thing against him. He would be the best man on the road if it wasn't for that."

"I've seen him so drunk that he couldn't stand, and yet he was running his engine."

"There'll be an accident some day if they don't look out for him," replied Ralph, little realizing the prophetic meaning of his words.

It was still quite a little run to Swift river, and the two boys spent the time in lively conversation, Ralph never once alluding to the subject of the robbery, but striving to keep Clif in the best of spirits, succeeding so well that the latter soon recovered his wonted gayety and chatted away as if there were not the burden of sin at his heart which might even yet crush and ruin him.

Fully two hours had passed, when suddenly, from around a curve, the bridge came in sight, apparently in sound condition.

"Hallo, it's then all right," said Ralph, joyfully. "I was afraid Jack Friel and his gang might have destroyed it."

Jack Friel is in Brandford."

"Unless he left on one of the other roads. Besides, he himself is not always where people think him, and some of his men might have attended to this job."

"What's that?"

"Smashing the bridge. It's all right, though, so here goes across, for I must make the switch before Lewis does, and I haven't much time to spare."

In another instant they had leaped upon the bridge, when Ralph felt a strange trembling beneath him, his face turning pale in the flash of an instant.

A horrible thought crossed his mind and rendered him nearly incapable of action.

The outlaws had tampered with the bridge after all, and it would fall beneath him!

He would perish, and the coming train, under the guidance of Lewis, perhaps already in a state of beastly intoxication, would be hurled into the chasm and a hundred lives sacrificed.

The thought was maddening, but only for an instant did the fearless lad waver.

The others must be warned at all hazards, for the safety of many lives depended upon his getting across, and his own destruction meant theirs as well, for it was not unlikely that in an emergency like this the drunken engineer would be unfit for duty.

Breathing a prayer for safety, Ralph seized the throttle, threw it wide open, and clapped on every ounce of steam.

Not a second had passed since he had first felt that trembling beneath him, although it seemed a very age.

The engine fairly flew over the rails, but when the center of the bridge was reached Ralph felt it trembling more violently than ever.

Two-thirds of the distance is passed, and the bridge actually sways and rocks beneath him, Clif feeling the motion, even unused as he is to the road.

"My God, Ralph, the bridge is falling!" he cries.

"Not yet!" answers Ralph, as he glances ahead of him.

Three-quarters of the way has been traversed, and Ralph glances quickly behind him, his eye fixed upon the rear trusses.

He sees them shake and totter, sees a gap appear between the bridge and the bank, widening at every instant, feels the track giving way beneath him.

The middle span has begun to sink, and with an icy chill at his heart, the boy looks ahead once more.

With a leap and a snort the engine clears the bridge, and rushes along the solid track.

CRASH!

Ralph hears the sound and darts a swift glance over his shoulder.

The bridge is a total ruin, and lies at the bottom of the river, a yawning chasm stretching out over the spot which Ralph has just passed.

"Thank God!" mutters Ralph, fervently, as he reduces his speed somewhat.

Clif is pale from excitement, and as he realizes the terrible danger from which he has just escaped, falls senseless upon the bench.

Ralph spins along the track in order to reach the switch, but now a new peril menaces him.

"Woo—oo—oo!"

The long-drawn shriek of a coming locomotive sounds upon the morning air.

Ralph springs to his feet, puts his head out of the window, and looks along the track.

The train for Brandford has passed the switch and is rushing down upon him at a frightful rate of speed, higher than any it has ever attained.

Surely the engineer must be mad to keep at that frantic pace, when he knows that the wildcat engine is approaching, and that there is but a single track for both to run upon.

"Heaven preserve me!" ejaculates Ralph. "With the broken bridge behind and this maniac in front, what chance have I? He must stop, or we will both be lost!"

He reverses as speedily as possible, and then, as his engine begins to retreat, he steps outside and runs along the foot-board to the bumpers, just over the pilot.

He has a red flag with him, and seizing hold of the standard with one hand, he waves the danger signal violently with the other, at the same time shouting to the engineer of the other train to stop.

As he clings there, desperately shouting at the top of his voice, and waving the red flag to and fro, his clustering locks blown back from his classic forehead, his head bare, and every fiber glowing with the most intense excitement, he looks more than human, and one might easily fancy him to be one of the heroes of old, come back to life.

The other engine is pressing him hard, and still the engineer does not seem to notice him, but dashes on under full head, the axles fairly hissing with the heat imparted to them.

"My God! it is useless. We will both be lost!" murmurs the poor fellow, despairingly. "Come what may, I shall not perish. I have done all I can, and now is the time to look out for myself."

He suddenly remembers what Mr. Merritt has said about sacrificing his engine in case of necessity, and he at once resolves to save his own life, no matter what may happen to the passenger train.

Quickly returning to the cab he shuts off steam, just enough to allow him to make the leap in safety, and then securing the precious packet, arouses Clif, and tells him what he must do.

He glances back and sees the open gap less than a hundred feet away, while in front, at half that distance, comes the passenger train, the steam and smoke rushing out in huge volumes, and the rails fairly quivering with the frightful motions given to them.

"Now!" cries Ralph. "It is life or death! Not an instant is to be lost! JUMP!"

Engine Lewis is crazy with drink, and has not the least idea of what he is doing, where he is going, or that he is in any danger.

Conductor Harris wonders that the train has passed the switch where Ralph's engine is still on the main track, and he begins to feel uneasy.

The speed is something frightful, and should the two engines collide, the loss of life would be terrible.

"What can be the matter?" he mutters to himself. "Is it possible that Ralph has not started? If so, why didn't I hear something about it?"

The feeling of anxiety increases, and finally the man goes out upon the front platform of one of the cars, and holding on by the guard, swings his body far out, and glances ahead.

The blood seems to freeze in his veins, and every nerve is paralyzed; every sense benumbed.

He sees Ralph on his engine waving his danger signal frantically, while Lewis, paying no attention to it, dashes on at a most alarming rate of speed.

He springs in, and seizing the bell-cord, gives the signal to stop the train.

No attention is taken of it, the engine rushing madly onward to certain destruction.

Again and again he pulls the cord, but with the same result.

He rushes headlong through one car after another, swaying and rocking most fearfully, and at last reaches the tender, all out of breath.

One quick glance shows him the situation in an instant.

The fireman has attacked the bottle, and lies across a pile of coal, hopelessly drunk.

The engineer is upon his seat, singing and shouting like a madman, crazy with drink, and utterly unconscious of his danger.

Two strides bring the conductor into the engine beside the drunken wretch, who scarcely seems to see him.

He rams in the throttle, puts the lever in the center, and claps on all the brakes.

He glances ahead and sees two figures leap from the wildcat engine just as she reaches the gap.

Then, with a plunge, she goes over, there is a splash and a boom, and the wildcat engine is a wreck at the bottom of Swift river.

The passenger train slows up, the brakes taking instant hold, and the engine comes to a dead halt, with the forward trucks on the very edge of the gap.

"Saved in the very nick!" cries our hero, and then, overcome by his emotions, falls senseless upon the stone abutments of the broken bridge.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOYS MAKE A DISCOVERY.

"CLIF!"

"What is it?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the leg."

"Badly?"

"I can't walk very well."

"Here, I'll give you a lift."

Ralph supported his comrade, and at this moment Harris, the conductor, came up.

"Narrow squeeze, eh, Ralph?"

"You're right. What was the matter with Lewis?"

"Drunk."

"And the fireman?"

"The same."

"That's bad."

"They'll find it so when Merritt hears of it."

"It will be as good as their jobs are worth."

"Lewis has been warned before, and I haven't any sympathy with him."

"No, nor I."

"It might have been a matter of several hundred lives if you hadn't stopped the train. Drunkenness in an engineer is a criminal offense, in my opinion."

"So it is in mine. Suppose I had been drunk?"

"Your passengers would have been in a bad fix."

"But I say?"

"Well?"

"What are we going to do now?"

"About getting across?"

"Yes."

"Send your passengers over in boats, and then telegraph to Merritt for a special train."

"Can't you go across now and do it, while I'm looking for boats?"

"Not very well. Send one of the brakemen."

"All right," and the conductor walked away.

"How do you feel now, Clif?"

"A little better. I am as hungry as a mule, though."

"We'll get something to eat pretty soon. There's a house over yonder."

"That's too far to walk."

"Oh, no. Rest a bit. Here, sit down on this rock."

Ralph helped his companion along a few yards, and they both sat down upon a large rock at the side of the road.

"I say, Ralph," whispered Clif, presently.

"Well?"

"You've got that stuff?"

"The tickets?"

"Sh! not so loud. Yes."

"I've got 'em."

"Hang on to 'em."

"You bet."

"You won't say anything?"

"About you?"

"Yes."

"Of course not. Trust me for that."

"That's right. I'd be in a deuce of a hole if I was found out."

"You ought to have thought of that before."

"I know that, but I didn't."

"No, I see that you didn't."

"Swear you won't say a word about me in the matter."

"I swear it!"

"Give me your hand on it."

"There it is."

A close grip sealed the bargain, and Clif felt safe, for he knew that Ralph would sooner die than break his oath.

"Let's be moving," he said, presently.

"Hold on! I want to hear what Merritt has to say. He may send me a message."

"You won't tell him about this matter by telegraph?"

"No, I daren't, for I don't understand cipher writing."

"The operator might give it away if you used anything else."
 "I am afraid so. They are not to be trusted, all of them."
 "Well, I'll wait for you, as I don't care to go tramping about the country alone."

"I won't be long."

"I hope not."

After waiting about an hour, Ralph suddenly cried:

"Hallo, there's the boy coming back now. He's got a message for me."

The boy soon approached, and Ralph called out:

"Hallo!"

"Hallo yourself!"

"Have you got a message for me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Old Merritt says you're to stay around here till night, and wait for word from him."

"All right; but I say, my lad!"

"Well?"

"You might be a little more respectful. If Mr. Merritt knew you called him 'Old Merritt,' he might not like it."

"Oh, bother! Is that all you've got to say?"

"That's quite enough, if you mind it. You're a good boy, Tom, though you are a little fresh sometimes."

"You won't say anything to old—Mr. Merritt, will you?" said the boy, in a tone of alarm, that was quite comical.

"Of course not," answered Ralph, laughing. "Now, run off, and see if Mr. Harris hasn't got something for you to do."

"All right."

"Stop a bit."

"What now—another scolding?"

"No; catch this," and Ralph threw the boy a quarter.

He did catch it, and thanking Ralph, ran off, while the latter said:

"He's a smart lad, though a little high strung and independent. He'd do anything for me, though."

"Because you treat him so well."

"No, but because I make him do what's right."

"I say, Ralph?"

"Say it then."

"Let's go and get something to eat."

"Steam's up, Clif, and here we go bowling down the track for the supply station."

Ralph then assisted his friend to his feet, and the two started off for the house which they had seen.

It was further away than they had thought, as there were several hills to cross, and Clif had to stop and rest several times before they reached it.

There was smoke coming from the chimney, and water had been lately splashed on the well curb, so that they knew there must be somebody about.

The door was partly ajar, and pushing it open without further ceremony, Ralph entered, finding himself in a small kitchen, where an old woman was raking the fire.

"Good-morning."

The old woman turned, showing a face that indicated great craftiness and cunning, and returned the salutation.

"Can you give us some breakfast, granny?" asked Ralph.

"No. There ain't nothin' in the house."

"Oh, we don't want much."

"You won't get much. There ain't no meal, nor ham, nor taters, nor nothing. We're clean given out."

"How will that do towards finding supplies?"

The young fellow rang a silver dollar on the pine table, and Clif threw another alongside of it.

The old hag, for such indeed she was, turned at the sound, examined the coins, felt of them, bit them, rang them on the table, and said:

"What's them?"

"Them's money," returned Ralph, laughing.

"Sho! I thought money was made of paper; nasty, dirty, crumpled paper."

"Some of it is, granny; but this is better than that, for the rats can't chew it."

"Where'd you get so much? Did you rob a bank?"

"Oh, no, that's honest money, granny, and we're a couple of honest lads, come to ask you for a nice breakfast."

"Honest lads, eh? Strange place, this, for such," she muttered.

"Honest lads," thought Clif. "Would to heaven I had not forfeited the title!"

"Strangers here, be you?" asked the old woman.

"Yes. We have just come in on the train. The bridge was wrecked and we had to stop."

"Well, I ain't got much, for my son Jack ain't been home lately. He ginerally brings a lot of money, and the boys comes with him. You don't know my son Jack!"

"No."

"Perhaps it's as well that you don't," muttered the old woman, half to herself. "They's a good many as knows him what wishes they didn't."

Then she turned, and addressing the two boys, said:

"Sot down and rest yourselves, and I'll go down cellar and get ye suthin' t' eat. D'y'e eat ham?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Well, I ain't got none, but I got some salt pork I kin fry, and a bit o' bacon."

"That's all right."

"Would you like some taters?"

"Most decidedly."

"Well, I can't give ye none, but I'll fry ye some apples and some inyuns, if ye ain't afraid of getting a bad breath."

"Not at all."

"Maybe you'd like some corn-cakes, cooked in the ashes?"

"If you've got them," said Ralph, winking at Clif.

"If you don't care about 'em, I won't make 'em."

"Oh, but we do."

"You wouldn't care for a jug of milk, would you?"

"Not much."

"I'll get some out of the well, and if you want it, all right."

"Suit yourself," answered Ralph, who was pretty sure of getting his milk now, and quite relished the idea of it.

"Well, you just wait till I come up, and I reckon I can give ye suthin'," and putting the money in her pocket, the old woman opened a door leading to the cellar and disappeared.

"That's a queer old specimen," muttered Clif, when she had gone.

"Yes, and I don't altogether like this place. Did you hear what she said to herself that time?"

"That there were some who knew her son that wished they did not."

"Then she wanted to know if we had robbed a bank."

"She evidently knows only that sort of fellows. I don't like the place myself. Suppose someone were to come in and find that stuff upon you?"

"We must hide it."

"But where?"

"I'll think about it."

"I say, Ralph, come here!" whispered Clif. "Come and look at this picture on the wall."

There was a dingy-looking photograph in a dirty frame tacked to the wall at one side of the room, which had attracted Clif's attention, and Ralph went over to look at it.

It represented a fairly handsome man, but one whom one would not like to trust very much, the face indicating a cunning, daring rogue.

"I don't like his looks," said Ralph, after a hasty glance.

"Do you know who it is?"

"Of course not."

"I do."

"What?"

"That is Jack Friel, the outlaw!"

"Good Lord! Then the sooner we stow that stuff away the better."

CHAPTER V.

THE RUSE—THE OUTLAWS—HOW DICK WENT TO WORK.

"HADN'T we better go out now as it is?"

"No, for there's no certainty of Friel's coming here to-day."

"Where will you hide the package?"

"I have it! Down the well!"

"Down the well?"

"Yes; come outside."

They went out to the well, and Ralph drew up a pail of milk which had been let down into the water to keep cool.

Then detaching the rope, he tied the bundle to it and let it down almost to the water on the shady side, so that it would not be noticed, fastening the upper end of the cord around a stone on the inside of the curb, and not on the outside, as it had been.

"That's all right," he said, when this had been done. "Now we'll take in the milk, so as to save the old woman from coming out, and then we're all right."

Taking the pail in his hand, Ralph re-entered the door just as the old woman came up, and he said at once:

"I've brought the milk for you, granny, so as to save you the trouble."

"H'm, reckon ye meant to be sure o' gettin' it. Well, I'll have things ready pretty soon."

She did as she had promised, and before long the boys sat down to a smoking hot breakfast of bacon and potatoes and corn cakes, with good fresh milk to wash it down.

By the time they had finished their breakfast it was well into the afternoon, and as it was quite warm out, they agreed to remain in the house until night.

The old woman had no objection to their doing so, and she showed them into an inner room, where they laid down upon a couple of cots and were soon fast asleep.

Ralph was awakened by the sound of voices, and going to the door noiselessly, he listened to the conversation.

"Don't you 'spose that's the same feller, Jack?" said one.

"Shouldn't be surprised, from what mother says."

"Old Meg is sly, I tell you, and what she don't know isn't worth finding out."

"She wouldn't be the mother of Jack Friel if she wasn't that kind," said the man, addressed as Jack.

"Ha! this must be the outlaw himself," thought Ralph. "We must get out of here."

"But she didn't see 'em have any bundle," said a third.

"That's what puzzled me, for they'd know too much to get rid of it."

"We must get it out of 'em then some way."

"Yes, and to-night, too, for the sooner we get it scattered over the country the better it'll be for us."

"Where yer going to put it?"

"All along the line o' the road. Once it's scattered there's money to be made. I'd give a hundred dollars to know where it is at this minute."

"I suppose you would," though Ralph, "and I'd give another to be safe out of this."

"They'll be getting up pretty soon, and then we'll find out all about it," said Jack. "Here's to our success."

Ralph heard the clinking of glasses, and then crossing the room opened the shutter and looked out.

To his surprise he found that it was night, having slept much longer than he supposed he had.

Quietly waking Clif, and cautioning him to make no noise, he said in a whisper:

"We must get out of this."

"What's the matter?"

"Jack Friel and his gang have come while we were asleep. I'll bet that the old woman drugged us, for we've been sleeping a terrible time."

"Are they there now?"

"Yes, in the next room."

"I'm going to put for it. I can go to Bradford and get the late train."

"Will you take the tickets?"

"No, no! I don't want to have anything more to do with them!"

"I'll go with you," replied Ralph, quietly.

"Oh, well, that's all right then."

"Let's get out the window."

They opened it, and slipping out, made their way round to the front of the house, Ralph starting toward the well where the tickets were concealed.

At that moment there was a flash of light from the door, and Friel appeared with several of his comrades.

"Hi! there they are!" he shouted. "Catch 'em, boys!"

Clif immediately made off, and Ralph, who had conceived a sudden idea that moment, shouted:

"Put in lively, Clif, get the train, and you're all right. Hang on to the stuff, whatever you do!"

Clif did put in as though his life depended upon it, and soon reaching the road, scampered down it at full speed in the direction of the nearest station on one of the rival roads.

Ralph followed him for a few steps in order to keep up the deception, for he had no idea of abandoning the precious bundle left in the well.

"Halt there!" shouted Friel.

Ralph ran a few paces, when a bullet came whizzing past his head.

"Hold on there, or I'll make a pepper-box of you!" growled the outlaw.

Ralph stopped, and when the man came up, said:

"What's the matter with you?"

"Matter enough, my young cock sparrow. You're my prisoner."

"What for?"

"You know well enough."

"You're Jack Friel, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was trying to stop those two fellows for you. They stole suthin' out o' your house, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"That is what I thought."

"And you were trying to stop 'em?"

"You just bet. They're making for the train on the Short-Cut railroad."

"I believe you're lying."

"But I tell you they are."

"I don't mean that. I mean that you're one of the fellows."

"Do you suppose I'd stop if I was?"

"You saw the two of 'em, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What did they call themselves?"

"One was Ralph and the other was Clif."

"Did they have anything with 'em?"

"Clif had a small bundle under his arm, and Ralph told him to be mighty careful of it, 'cause it was wuth lots of money."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Oh, I lives around here. I seed the two fellers jumpin' out the winder, and I s'pcioned suthin' was wrong, and so I follered and tried to stop 'em."

"If I thought you weren't telling me the truth, I'd put a bullet down your throat."

"Oh, you can count on me, pard, every time. I'm solid, I am. I know better than to lie to Jack Friel."

"He's all right, Jack," said one of the men. "We can't waste no time on him. We must get that stuff to-night, or we're out o' pocket."

"We will get it, never fear."

"Then come back to the house and I'll tell you how it's going to be done."

"You just make tracks, sonny," said Friel to Ralph, "for I might change my mind about you."

"All right, old pard," and Ralph moved away slowly.

As soon as the party had re-entered the house, however, he stole quietly up under the window and heard all that was said.

"They'll get the 1:10 morning express on the Short-Cut," said one of the men.

"Yes. Nice name, that, for a road that has to go fifteen miles around a mountain instead of cutting through."

"They've got little more'n time to get there by running."

"Yes."

"Then, if we was to take the real short cut, over the mountains, by the turnpike, we could get there ahead of 'em."

"Get where ahead of them?"

"At the bluffs what overhang the track."

"Well?"

"Three or four of us, posted on them bluffs, could roll a big rock down on the track, couldn't we?"

"Yes."

"And stop the train?"

"Yes."

"Or smash it, either."

"Yes."

"Then we run down, and when the lads come out along with the other passengers to see what the trouble is—"

"We collar the loot. Ned, you've got a great head. Just what I was going to propose."

"It's a good idea."

"So good that I told one of the boys as I came in to harness up the light market wagon, put in three or four bags of potatoes for a blind, and have it all ready for us."

"Good enough."

"It's now about half an hour from train-time."

"Yes."

"If we start in ten minutes we can, by taking the road over the mountains, reach the bluffs ahead of the train."

"Certain."

"And have lots of time to place ourselves before the 1:10 comes bowling along."

"Quite right."

"She goes like lightning."

"She does so."

"And if we chuck one boulder on the track before she gets under the bluff, and another when she does get under, she'll be knocked to everlasting smash."

"Wagon's ready, Jack," said a man entering from the rear door at this moment.

"All correct. Ned and Jim will sit beside me on the seat and Tom on the taters. We'll want as many as that."

"Easy."

"Get your shooters, boys, and be ready to start in five minutes."

Ralph did not wait to hear any more, but slipping around to the well, hastily drew up the packet of tickets and hid it in his clothes.

He was unobserved, and then listening for an instant, crept rapidly to the rear of the house, where a swift horse stood harnessed to a light farmer's wagon or box-buggy.

There were three or four sacks of potatoes in the bottom, and letting down the tail-board, he pulled one of them out and dropped it upon the ground.

Dragging it a few yards away, he quickly untied the neck of it, and, catching it by the bottom, dumped the contents upon the ground.

He did this at a spot where they would not be likely to attract attention right away, and then returning to the wagon, got in and put up the tail-board.

"There'll be one mighty queer bag of potatoes in this lot," he muttered, as he lay down in the bottom of the wagon and put his feet into the sack.

He heard Friel calling from inside, and rapidly drawing the bag over him, he covered his head and lay well over to one side, pulling one of the bags close to him and partly covering him.

"They little think they are going to give me a free ride," he muttered; "but I intend to stop their little game and haul them in at the same time if I can."

He had just disposed himself nicely in the bottom, looking for all the world like a sack of garden produce, when Friel came out, accompanied by the three men who were to go with him.

Friel sat in the middle of the seat to drive, one man being on either side of him and one on a bag of potatoes in the wagon, and off they started on their errand of villainy, Ralph chuckling to himself to think how nicely he would outwit them.

CHAPTER VI.

A ROUGH RIDE—THE IMPERILED TRAIN—RALPH AGAIN ON TIME.

OVER the rough road went the wagon at a good speed, the horse being a swift one indeed, and before they had gone half a mile Ralph felt as sore as though he had been run over by a whole train of cars.

When they reached the mountain road it was better traveling in some ways, but not so good in others.

The road was smoother, and the wagon being provided with springs, did not jolt so much, but occasionally they would go down a steep hill, and then everything in the end of the wagon would come piling down upon Ralph, making him feel particularly uncomfortable.

Occasionally, too, the wheels would strike a stone, and Ralph would receive a bounce which would cause him to grunt in spite of himself.

As the men kept up a steady chat, however, his grunts and occasional "Ohs!" were not noticed, particularly as Tom, who sat upon a sack of potatoes, indulged quite frequently in the exclamation himself, although it was generally interlarded with something more profane, if not more forcible.

Once or twice they met farmers' wagons going in a contrary direction, but as they seemed mere market men, they were not disturbed or questioned.

Had these men known their real character, there is no doubt that there would have been trouble, for large rewards had been offered for the capture of Friel and his gang, and there were many that would have been glad to earn them.

Bump, bump, bump!

Rattle, rattle, rattle!

"Get up, Blazer! Go faster, lad!"

Under the impetus of the keen lash, the swift-footed steed dashed over the road, the trees seeming to fly by, and a mile was traversed in no time.

"S'pect them potatoes 'll get a nice poundin'," remarked Tom, presently.

"If they get it any worse than I do, they're to be pitied," thought Ralph, though he kept his remarks strictly to himself.

On and on they went over the mountain road, Ralph being sore in every part of his body, but determined to see the thing out, come what would.

The rough ride could not last forever, and he knew that he would have plenty of time to rest after he had finished with the villains, and this thought consoled him and made him bear all his bumps and bounces with perfect equanimity.

The night was quite dark, the sky being heavily overcast, although the moon would occasionally peer forth from the thick banks of clouds for a moment, adding thereby to the wildness of the scene.

The wind was fresh, and sounds could be heard to a great distance, as Ralph presently found out.

He was listening to the talk of the outlaws, learning many facts of great importance concerning them, when suddenly he heard a long-drawn whistle.

Whoo-oo-oo!

"There she comes!" said Tom. "We'll be late!"

"You're off!" said Friel. "She's a long way back yet. Seven or eight miles at least."

"How do you know?"

"Cause if she were any nearer you could see her. There's quite a stretch of track in sight from here."

Whoo-oo!

"She's only a little more'n half round," remarked Ned. "I can see the light she makes on the sky."

"Better start the nag up a bit, hadn't you, Jack?" asked Jim.

Whack!

The whip cut the animal's flank sharply, and away he spun over the road, past rock and tree, by hedge and thicket, each succeeding object seeming to rush by like lightning.

They were now on a steep down grade, and the men were obliged to hold on to the seat with both hands to prevent themselves from being thrown out.

Friel braced his feet firmly against the low dash-board, and held tightly upon the reins, taking care that the horse should not stumble, an event which would prove disastrous to their project.

Dick thought that there certainly was not a single square inch upon his whole body that was not black and blue, but he wasn't the sort of boy to mind a thing like that when he had an affair like the present on hand, and he suffered in silence, resolving firmly to make his traveling companions go through just such another experience before he got through with them.

The descent was ended at last, and the horse whisked along the level for a mile or so, when Friel suddenly checked his speed and turned into a by-path, at a point where the fence had been broken down.

After going a short distance, Friel stopped the horse, and dismounting, led him into a thicket, where he hitched him to a tree, and then called upon his comrades to follow.

On the line of the Short-Cut railroad, just after it had rounded the mountain, was a high bluff overhanging the track, from which a view of the neighboring country for miles around could be seen.

The place had never been supposed dangerous, as the bluff was solid, and the chance of its ever crumbling away seemed remote indeed.

There were huge boulders scattered around on top, to be sure, but as none had ever fallen off of their own accord, it did not seem likely that any one would push them off, and in fact such an idea had never entered the heads of the railroad managers, although Jack Friel had long considered the plan as a good one, and had only been waiting for a fitting opportunity to put it into operation.

This bluff was not far off now, Friel being so well acquainted with the country as to be able to drive to it at once with no trouble, and thither the four ruffians made their way.

Whoo-oo-oo!

"Fifteen minutes before she passes," said Friel, taking a huge gold watch, suspended from the end of three feet of heavy gilt chain, out of his pocket, and looking at it by the light of a dark lantern.

"She's due below there at 1:45," remarked Jim.

"And here at 1:40. Well, we ain't got but ten minutes after all; but that's enough."

The men disappeared, and after waiting a reasonable time, Ralph crawled out of the sack and looked around him.

No one was in sight, and he dropped upon the ground, shook himself, stretched his legs, and took the path to the bluff.

Before doing so, however, he unhitched the horse from the wagon, and leading him back to the road, gave him a sharp cut in the ribs, which started him off at a lively rate.

"That settles you," he remarked, with a quiet laugh. "My friends will have to walk back, I guess, if they get out of this scrape at all."

He might have taken the horse and got away, to be sure, but there were several good reasons for his not doing so.

In the first place he was not the boy to see human life endangered and not try to prevent it, and his first duty was to outwit the villains and save the train from destruction.

Secondly, he would not be able to reach the foot of the bluffs and the station, where there would be probably someone in waiting, in time, for it was at least a couple of miles down and along the track, and even at this moment he could hear the whistle of the train.

He must hasten or he would be too late, and with a silent prayer for the safety of the threatened train, he hurried forward and soon reached the bluff.

On the outer edge were gathered the four villains, hard at work pushing a boulder toward the brink, Friel giving directions and working at the same time.

Just back from the ledge of the bluff where the train wreckers were stationed there arose a steep bank, not very high indeed, but quite precipitous, from which one could overlook the actions of the men, and see the train below as well.

Toward this Ralph made his way cautiously, having to take a detour in order to escape observation.

He could hear the roar of the coming train, and knew that he had but a few minutes in which to act.

It would be madness to attack the villains openly, for they would not only kill him, but compass the destruction of the train as well.

And yet, they must be prevented from accomplishing their hellish purpose by some means.

Ralph hardly knew what he had best do, but trusting to good fortune, he hastened forward, and reached the little ledge overhanging the outlaws' position just as the train came in sight around the curve.

"Give her another shove," said Friel, "and she'll be at the edge ready to drop at the right moment."

"We ought to get one on the track before she gets here."

"Yes, but we can't do it. Push lively now, and we'll fix it."

"Ha! what's that?" cried Tom, suddenly.

"Nothing. Don't stop to listen to every noise you hear, or we'll be too late."

Down the track came the train, the head-light casting a long track of light ahead, the sparks flying up and mingling with the thick clouds of smoke, and the light from the windows making the whole

look like some huge monster with one huge eye and numberless glittering scales.

On the rock above Ralph is tugging away at an overhanging boulder, which a little strength, well exerted, will loosen.

It is poised directly above the ruffians, and woe to them if it falls.

The moon just peeps from the clouds and reveals the form of the boy, standing upon the summit of the ledge pushing away at the rock with all his might.

Just below him are Friel and his gang, exerting themselves to the utmost, and with every chance of success, for they have pushed the boulder nearly to the edge, and one more effort will send it over.

Further below still is the train, rushing on to almost certain destruction, the passengers all unconscious of the danger that threatens, and every heart is light and gay.

In another instant the train will be under the ledge.

In another instant the huge rock will be hurled from above and go crushing through the cars.

A hundred lives depend upon one moment's events.

A hundred lives depend upon the strength of a single boy.

It proves sufficient, for as Friel and his cut-throats are about to make their last effort, Ralph succeeds in pushing the rock from the edge of the bank.

It falls with a sickening thud right into the midst of this group, their own efforts are interrupted, and the train sweeps by in safety!

CHAPTER VII.

A RACE FOR LIFE—CAPTURED—AN ALARMING PROPOSITION.

CRASH!

The huge boulder fell right amongst the villains, and put a most summary stop to their actions.

It crashed in Tom's skull and ground one side of him to a jelly, though he suffered but little, as the first blow killed him almost instantly.

It rolled over upon Jim's legs and then broke his back, putting him out of misery in an instant.

One huge fragment of it struck Ned on the shoulder and knocked him senseless, not killing him, indeed, but putting him for the moment in an utterly useless condition.

Friel was thrown down, but not badly hurt, and in a twinkling he was upon his feet and tearing about him like a wild beast.

Ralph was just disappearing behind the bank, but quick as a flash the outlaw was after the daring lad, revolver in hand.

Bang! Bang!

It was no toy weapon that the outlaw carried, and the reports rang out upon the air with startling distinctness, awaking the echoes far and wide.

One bullet whizzed just over Ralph's head, while the other passed through the skirt of his short coat as it fluttered in the wind.

"A close shave that," thought Ralph, as he sped onward. "I must get under cover. This fellow is no mean shot."

Bang!

The bullet went zip! zip! through the leaves, and buried itself in a tree-trunk which Ralph had just put between himself and the enraged outlaw.

Presently Ralph reached the place where he had left the wagon, and then he felt sorry that he had set the horse loose, or otherwise there might now have been a chance for escape.

"Anyhow, I meant it for the best," he thought, "for I had no idea I was going to make such an awful scattering in their ranks. Still, if I hadn't killed them they would have killed me, and many others besides, so I guess I took the right switch, after all."

"Stop there, you young whelp!" yelled Friel. "Stop, or I'll riddle you so you won't hold a pint of water!"

Ralph was perfectly satisfied of the truth of the man's words, and without stopping to answer, which would give Friel an idea of his position, he plunged ahead at full speed and soon reached the gap in the fence.

Bang!

The bullet came dangerously near, for Friel was a good shot and had a pretty clear notion of where Ralph was.

He knew that the lad was no novice, and that in all probability he would make for the gap in the fence, feeling sure that Ralph had followed them, though how he could not tell, and that he would be certain to go out the same way he came in.

Ralph was uninjured, as I have said, although there was little enough room to spare between his ear and the bullet, and he felt more than ever the need of getting out of range of that loud-voiced weapon.

As he struck the road he heard a sudden sound which inspired him with the wildest hope.

Bang!

"Come here, Blazer!" he called at a venture.

The horse neighed again, and trotting gently up to him, halted.

The sagacious animal had returned, after darting down the road for some distance, upon Ralph's giving him that cut evidently knowing that his master would want him again.

"Steady, Blazer, old boy," said Ralph, recognizing the animal at a glance, and then without further ado he leaped upon his back, clapped heels to his side, and clinging tightly to the animal's mane, went spinning down the road with the speed of the wind.

Friel reached the gap just in time to see the horse go bounding off, and he swore most terribly.

He whistled to the horse to come back, but Blazer paid no attention to this and kept on at the same rattling pace as before.

"Stop, I say!" roared Friel. "I'll shoot if you don't!"

"Shoot away!" answered Ralph. "I'm not afraid! You can't hit anything!"

Better not be too sure of your triumph, Ralph, for you are far from being out of the woods yet, as the saying goes.

Bang!

The distance was too great to have the bullet take effect, but at that instant the horse stumbled and nearly threw Ralph from his back.

He kept on, but he limped badly now, and Ralph felt that it would be cruelty to urge him any further, and he was preparing to dismount when a new-comer appeared.

This was Ned, who having recovered from his injuries in a measure, and hearing the report of fire-arms, suspected that Friel was in pursuit of the person who had interrupted them, and he at once took a short cut in order to head him off.

He descended a narrow path leading from the cliff to the road below, and came out at the point of intersection just as Ralph went dashing ahead.

His revolver was in his hands upon the instant, and blazing away, he struck the horse in the leg and brought him to a sudden standstill.

Ralph was thrown, but not as violently as he would have been had he been entirely in the saddle, having already started to dismount.

He was upon his feet almost instantly, but was met by Ned with a loaded revolver in his hand.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. "You've been helpin' us some more, I s'pose, jist as you did back to the farm-house."

The only reply that Ralph made was to rush with all his might against Ned before the latter could fire, a movement which sent the ruffian sprawling and caused him to drop his weapon.

This Ralph quickly picked up, and as Friel came rushing down upon him, turned quickly and fired.

Bang!

Bang!

"Where the deuce did you get that pop?" asked Friel, who had been hit, though not dangerously, his own arm having been hurt in consequence.

"It's mine," said Ned, "I dropped it. Got another, though."

"There he goes toward the station. We must collar him before he gets there."

"There ain't nobody about now, and he can't get in."

"I don't know about that."

By this time there was quite a considerable moonlight, the clouds having greatly broken away since the first arrival of the outlaws, and Ralph could be seen most distinctly, as he ran down the track towards the little station, now about half a mile distant.

Friel fired half a dozen shots in rapid succession, loading as he ran, but Ralph, apprehending that he would do this, did not keep a straight course, but jumped every now and then from side to side, which greatly disconcerted the outlaw, and caused him to give utterance to the most blood-curdling oaths.

Bang!

It was Ralph's turn now, and he sent a bullet through Friel's left

ear, which carried away a considerable portion of that useful organ, and made its owner swear louder and harder than before.

Bang!

Another shot from Ralph, almost the last one he has, whistles so uncomfortably close to Jack Friel's head that he drops to the ground and cries to Ned:

"Head the young imp off if you can, Ned. He's the worst customer I ever tackled!"

Bang!

Ned's shot fell short, for Ralph was speeding on now faster than ever. But Friel was a swifter runner than Ned, and he soon began to gain on the fugitive.

By the time he had got in range again, however, Ralph had reached the shelter of the little station, dodging behind the corner just as Friel's bullet whizzed by.

Ralph had just one bullet remaining, and he determined to make this tell, there being nothing to do but fight for it now, as the station men had departed, the place was locked up, and there was nowhere to secrete oneself.

He moved cautiously around the house and peering out behind a water-pipe saw Friel just disappearing around the other side.

Quickly changing his own position, he crept forward so as to intercept the man when he should turn the next corner.

He was in the shadow, while Friel would be in the light, and dropping to his knees in order to get a better aim, he waited the man's approach with considerable anxiety.

Suddenly he heard a noise behind, and turning quickly, he beheld a man almost upon him.

He fired at once, but his aim was poor, and in an instant the fellow had grappled with him and tried to throw him down.

The man was Ned, whom Ralph had left entirely out of his calculations, not supposing him to be anywhere about.

He struggled to get free, but the man held on tenaciously, at the same time shouting to Friel to come up and help secure the desperate young fellow.

Friel rushed in immediately, and poor Ralph was thrown down and disarmed, the outlaw taking his belt to tie his hands behind his back.

"So it's you, is it?" he said. "I believe you were lying to me all the time down there at the house, and that you are one of the young fellows we are after."

"I cannot help what you believe," answered Ralph, coolly.

"I don't see how in thunder you followed us, though, for you couldn't have run all that distance, nor come on the train. And I know you didn't ride in the wagon with us."

"I got here and stopped your devilish work at all events, and it matters little how I came."

"Yes, you killed two of my pals!" hissed Friel. "You'll have to pay for that."

"How many would you have killed had your plan succeeded? You don't seem to think of that."

Friel flushed angrily, and then said with a coarse laugh:

"That's our affair. We don't stop a job because somebody's got to be killed; if we did, we'd be idle the most of the time."

"Good thing if you were. At any rate, you've missed your game this time, and you won't make the big haul you thought you would."

"Let's take him back to the house, Ned," said Friel; "but stop, first of all, let's search him."

"Search me," thought Ralph; "then they will discover everything!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A DASH FOR FREEDOM—RALPH'S DANGER AND LOSS—THE ARREST.

"All right," said Ned. "Search him it is!"

Ralph had other plans, however, and bound as he was, he suddenly darted out of the grasp of the outlaw, and went at full speed down the road, having already left the little station.

Friel uttered an exclamation of surprise at this most sudden and unexpected movement upon the part of the young fellow, and quickly drawing his revolver, took a hasty aim at the flying figure, and pulled the trigger.

Snap!

The weapon had been emptied during that exciting chase for life, and the man had neglected to reload it.

In doing this now, although he ran at full speed, he lost time, and when he at last fired Ralph had just darted down a turn in the road.

Luckily his legs were in no wise impeded, and as he was able to swing his shoulders as he ran, he made about as good time as though his arms had been free.

As far as running went he was all right, of course, but when it came to defending himself, the fact of his arms being tied would be a great hindrance to him, and might result in his ultimate capture.

Ralph was obliged to keep upon the track, as in the wood he could not make such good progress, his arms being secured, though otherwise he would have plunged into their shadowy recesses at once.

Down the track he went, therefore, leaping nimbly from tie to tie, avoiding obstacles and keeping his eye fixed upon the road ahead of him, not daring to turn his head for fear of striking something and throwing himself down.

When Friel catches sight of him again he is beyond reach of a pistol-shot, but he fires nevertheless, thinking to frighten him perhaps.

Forgetting his former caution, Ralph turns his head to see if there is any chance of the bullet hitting him.

At that moment he strikes his foot against a projecting spike, and falls heavily upon the track, his head hitting the rail and making him senseless.

When he recovered it was with a feeling of peril at his heart, and he turned his head and looked about him.

He is still lying upon the track, his hands tied behind him, his clothing disordered, and his matted hair falling in a damp mass upon his pale forehead.

There is no one in sight, and it is still dark, though there are signs of the dawn now in the eastern sky, and the sounds which are usually heard at the coming of day indicate that the busy world is again awakening.

Ralph tries to rise, but the effort is too much for him, and he falls again upon the track, the dull pain which he feels at his head increasing, while the sense of terror, vague and undefined though it was, seems to grow upon him.

He cannot account for it, as there is no one around, and he is perfectly free to go where he will, except that his hands are bound as before, which prevents his helping himself or warding off an attack.

He can walk at all events, he thinks, and he essays once more to get upon his feet.

Hark!

What sound is that which suddenly arouses again all the terror within him, and blanches his cheek with the hue of death?

The shriek of an approaching engine!

The morning train is due, and even at this instant is rounding the curve and sweeping down upon him with irresistible force.

He hears the rattle of the wheels, the snort and shriek of the engine, the puffing and groaning, panting and rocking of the huge monster, while the very ground seems to tremble beneath his feet.

The fierce glare of the headlight shines in his face, nearly blinding him, while the hot breath seems to choke him, every sense being paralyzed, as it were, with the knowledge of the coming danger.

Then the instinct of self preservation, common in us all, from the highest to the lowest, animates him, and he resolves to live at all hazards.

He cannot rise, indeed, but he can crawl, and, throwing himself flat upon his face, he works along with the energy of despair, until his body is half across the rail.

The engine is fearfully near, however, and even yet he may be too late; but as the thought of his duty crosses his mind he makes another effort and draws his legs half off the rail.

Hasten, Ralph, or you may yet be too late, and remain a poor, miserable cripple for life!

The boy throws one rapid glance toward the coming train, and his heart leaps into his mouth.

It is almost upon him, and the loss of a second will cost him his feet.

With the very agony of despair he throws himself forward and rolls over upon the ground, a prayer for help rising to his lips.

Then there is a rush and a roar, a shriek and a snort, a cloud of smoke and cinders, a gust of wind like a tornado, and the train has passed, leaving Ralph lying just outside the rail.

Maimed and mangled? A cripple for life?

Not so, but safe and unharmed, though his escape has been compassed as if by a miracle.

"Thank Heaven for that!" murmurs Ralph, as he raises upon one elbow and gazes at the vanishing train. "That was a narrow squeeze, but an inch of a miss is as good as a mile, and I am as well satisfied as though it hadn't been so close."

The efforts he had made seemed to strengthen rather than exhaust him, and he did not feel the reaction which usually follows moments of great excitement, but, on the contrary, he seemed nerved to increased effort.

He arose with no trouble, and finding by one trial that the belt about his arms had been considerably loosened in his recent struggle, he summoned all his strength and snapped it asunder as though it had been mere pack-thread.

Upon the instant he thrust his hands deep into his pockets in search of the previous packet for which he had already sighed so much.

Horror! It had been taken from him while he lay helpless and unconscious upon the track!

A thorough search failed to reveal its presence, either upon his person or anywhere about, on the track or near it, and at last the conviction forced itself upon him that it had been stolen, and that after all his labor had been in vain.

"Never mind," he said, fiercely, "I will succeed yet, in spite of all obstacles. I have set out to recover this property, and I shall succeed!"

It was getting quite light now, and as Ralph walked along in the direction of the town he saw two or three persons approaching, to whom he determined to give information concerning the whereabouts of Friel and his men, in order that they might be apprehended.

When they came up to him, however, he discovered that Friel himself was among them, although he had not at first discovered him.

The outlaws themselves seemed to be endeavoring to escape from some danger now, for they hurried along, scarcely seeming to notice Ralph, until Friel whispered something to one of them, when the lad was instantly seized, though not bound, and hurried along with the others.

"So you escaped a violent death back there," said Friel, stepping up beside Ralph and taking his arm. "You were lucky not to have been run over."

"No thanks to you for escaping it, though," returned Ralph. "Where are you taking me now?"

"Out of the way of the officers. It wouldn't do for you to fall in with them after having been in our company."

"Indeed it would not, you villain, for you may be sure that I would give them all the assistance in my power to help them capture you. Jack Friel is not the sort of a man to be allowed to run loose at will."

Friel only laughed at this, and all hands hurried forward towards the little station near the bluff, the outlaws from time to time glancing uneasily over their shoulders as though they expected some danger from that quarter.

Ralph presently learned that the authorities had in some manner got wind of the presence of the gang, and that at this moment a large force was in pursuit of them.

"Clif has done his duty after all," thought Ralph, "and the telegraph has been doing some lively work this morning."

It had, indeed, and livelier than Ralph imagined even, for at that very moment when the party of cutlaws was hurrying forward towards the little station where they expected to seize a couple of hand-cars and make their escape upon them, a second party was waiting for them, ready to pounce down upon them as soon as they made their appearance.

"Hurry up, boys," cried Friel, "I hear the constables behind us."

There was, indeed, a confused murmur coming from the direction of the town, and in another moment a large party was seen approaching around the curve.

Friel and his men, with Ralph in their midst, dashed forward and reached the station, but at that moment the ambushed officers sprang out, and the evil-doers found themselves caught between two fires.

A struggle took place upon the instant—pistols cracking, men shouting, knives gleaming, clubs resounding, and a perfect din ensuing.

In the midst of all, the leader of the gang escaped with two or three of his best men, but the rest, including Ned, were captured, and poor Ralph along with them, and notwithstanding his protestations of innocence,

ence, he was handcuffed to Ned and hustled off to the town jail, where Ned and the rest swore that he was one of them, and had planned the robbery and destruction of the midnight express.

CHAPTER IX.

IN DURANCE VILE—THE INTERVIEW—FREEDOM.

"LET the prisoner be remanded," said the magistrate before whom Ralph had been brought.

"But I tell you I am innocent," said the young man, impulsively. "A mistake has been committed. Send for Mr. Merritt, and he will tell you who I am. Do you think that a person in my position would be in league with robbers?"

The man seemed disposed to listen to the young fellow, when Ned spoke up and said:

"If you think to go back on us, and turn State's evidence like that, young fellow, you are mistaken. Search him, Mr. Judge, if you think I'm lying."

Two of the court officers immediately seized Ralph, and turned out his pockets before he could offer the least resistance.

To his utter surprise the search revealed a black silk mask, several fine saws and files, a pistol and cartridges, and several letters implicating the bearer in certain plots put on foot by Friel and his gang.

How these things came into his possession Ralph could not imagine; but, at all events, they served to fasten his alleged guilt more conclusively upon him, and gave additional weight to the evidence already deposited to by the crafty villain, who, seeing himself caught, was resolved to drag Ralph down with him.

It was useless for Ralph to protest, as he only made his case the worse; for, remembering his promise to Clif to say nothing concerning the robbery in the railroad offices, he could not explain his vague allusions to the crime committed by Friel and his pals.

He was too honorable to violate his oath and save himself at the expense of his friend, and consequently, while a word would have set him free, he remained silent and bore the heavy burden of suspicion, which the villains took good care should be made yet heavier.

At noon-time a surprise awaited him, for while he was sitting in his cell, heavy-hearted and desolate, Mr. Merritt himself entered.

"Ralph," said the gentleman, "I am sorry to see you here, and still more sorry to hear of what you are accused."

"Do you, then, believe me guilty?" said the lad, rising and coming forward.

"I must credit appearances, Ralph, though I would doubt them if I could, believe me."

"You know I would never join such a band of evil-doers as Jack Friel's gang. You cannot believe me capable of that?"

"It is not that which is the worst thing charged against you. There are other accusations graver than this."

"What car you mean?"

"The safe of the company has been broken open, and a packet of tickets worth thousands of dollars taken out."

"I know it."

The words were spoken hastily, and before Ralph could weigh them and judge of their double meaning.

The young man saw his mistake at once, and when Mr. Merritt pressed him for an explanation he was silent, merely protesting his innocence as before.

"You say you know this?"

"I did say so."

"And yet you claim to be innocent?"

"Yes."

"How did you know that the safe had been broken open, then? The charge has not yet been made public."

Ralph made no reply, and the man proceeded:

"Perhaps you had an accomplice who was more guilty than yourself. Name him, and I swear to get you clear of this unfortunate scrape."

"I neither did the thing myself nor had an accomplice."

"But you know something of it?"

No answer.

Mr. Merritt pressed the question.

"Perhaps so," said Ralph.

"Then tell me all about it."

"I cannot."

"But you know something that may, perhaps, lead to the detection of the robbers?"

"I cannot say."

"Tell me and let me be the judge."

"I can say nothing. I know nothing."

"Then I must think you guilty."

"You surely would not condemn me upon the evidence of a villain like this pal of Jack's."

"There is, I am sorry to say, other evidence upon which I base my conclusions."

"And that is—"

"Your handkerchief and cigar case were found in the room where the safe stood."

"It is false!"

"I wish it was. Oh, Ralph, Ralph, how came you to commit such a crime?" continued the kind-hearted gentleman, nearly breaking down under the stress of emotion.

"I did not!"

"But the evidence? Come, come, my lad, make a clean breast of it, and I will do all I can to save you."

"I have nothing to say."

"Someone temp'ted you to do it, for I know you could not conceive such a plan yourself."

"You know that I never enter the offices, sir," answered Ralph, hotly; "that I know nothing of the business of the company, that I have no motives for robbing it, having no knowledge of its secrets. And if those tickets are stolen, you must look to someone else to tell you where they are."

"You said you knew they were stolen yourself."

"Well?"

"Then you must know the thief."

No answer.

"Who is it?"

Still no answer, for Ralph would sooner cut off his right hand than betray Clif, unworthy though he was, after having given his promise.

"If you persist in saying nothing, I shall be obliged to believe you guilty in spite of myself," continued Mr. Merritt, after a pause.

"I am innocent," answered Dick, "and if you will give me an opportunity I can prove it."

"How so?"

"By restoring the stolen property."

"You know where it is?"

"No."

"Then how can you get it back?"

"By following up the scoundrels who now have it and wresting it from them."

Mr. Merritt smiled and said sadly:

"Why will you not confess, Ralph? It is sad to see you so persistent in an evil cause. I would not believe it if I had been told of it yesterday."

"If you were my friend, indeed you would not believe it now," replied Ralph, in very bitterness of spirit. "I tell you I am innocent, in spite of appearances, and you will yet repent your hard words. Leave me, but be assured that I shall do everything in my power to fasten the guilt where it belongs, and to show you that I have always kept on the straight and only correct line, never going down the wrong switch or heeding false signals. You will find me as true to my principles as I have been to my engine."

"I hope so, Ralph; but it looks—"

"Say no more," interrupted Ralph, hastily, and pushing the man from him. "You still doubt me, and I have nothing more to say. You will change your mind some day, but for the present I have no more to say. Go!"

The superintendent cast a look of sadness upon his favorite and then turned away, the iron door slamming behind him, and leaving Ralph once more alone.

It was hard to be thought a thief, and especially by one who had always entertained so high an opinion of him, and poor Ralph felt bowed down indeed, after Mr. Merritt had gone.

He said that he would prove his innocence and fasten the guilt where it belonged; but how was this to be accomplished? He did not want to implicate Clif, for in that case the latter, now repenting of his false step, would be ruined forever, and the door of a

higher life be irrevocably closed upon him. If anything were to be done, there was no time to lose, for Friel was smart enough to dispose of his plunder at once, which he would do if steps were not taken to prevent it.

"If I had not got mad I might have told old Merritt that Friel had the stuff," thought Ralph, blaming himself, like the true, manly fellow he was, for what was not entirely his fault. "Now, I won't have a chance, and the rascal will get away. Oh, if I could only make my way out of this!"

Escape was nearer at hand than he thought.

The day passed drearily enough, as no one came in except the jailer at night to bring the young fellow his evening meal.

This man informed him that he would be kept in a separate cell until the next day, when he would be arraigned and a time set down for his trial—a piece of news which Ralph received with indifference.

The man had been gone perhaps an hour, when to Ralph's surprise the door was again opened, and a muffled figure entered, and made signs for him to remain quiet.

Then taking him by the hand, the mysterious intruder led him away out and along a corridor, lined by cell doors on either side, a deep silence reigning all around.

Bidding the young man keep silence by a quick motion, the figure led the way through a small square room, where a solitary watchman kept slack guard, his bowed head and stentorian snoring betokening that he was fast locked in the arms of the drowsy god.

Beyond where this man slept was a door, and pushing this aside the silent guide led the way up a winding flight of stairs, coming out at length into the open air.

He then shut the door behind him, and said, suddenly:

"Ralph, old fellow, I've got you part of the way out, but the hardest part is yet to come."

Our hero recognized the voice of Clif in a moment, and turning about, he said, in tones of surprise:

"In the name of all that is wonderful, Clif, how did you manage to get in here? How did you know where I was?"

"Oh, that I learned from Merritt, and as for the other part, I bribed one of the keepers. Money will do nearly everything, you know."

"You knew that Jack Friel's pals were captured?"

"Yes."

"And that I was supposed to be one?"

"Yes. You were a good fellow to say nothing of my part of the business."

"There is more to be done yet, for I have lost the package, and Jack Friel has it. What are you going to do now? Could not you manage to get me out altogether?"

"No, for I couldn't bribe everybody. I knew you were in trouble, and meant to get you out. You'll have to keep quiet, I suppose, for a while, for breaking jail is an offense against the law."

"I don't care if it is," replied Ralph with spirit. "It was an injustice to put me there in the first place, and Merritt could have bailed me out if he had chosen."

"Never mind him. I'll bail you out myself. Come along."

Clif then led the way along the roof until he came to the edge, and here Ralph found that a rope had been left hanging over the coping and reaching nearly down to the next building, a distance of about fifteen feet.

Clif descended first, followed by Ralph, both boys being obliged to drop a few feet upon a sloping roof, where there was great danger of losing their footing.

To add to the danger, it had begun to drizzle, making the slate of the roof a most dangerous substance to walk upon; and more than once, as they were making their way down towards where there was a still lower building, Ralph was obliged to seize Clif by the arm to prevent his falling.

The end of the slope was reached at last, and bracing his feet in the eaves trough, Ralph assisted Clif to descend, and was then helped down himself.

The two made their way along this roof a few feet, when suddenly a light gleamed from the jail and hoarse voices were heard calling out that a prisoner had escaped.

"We will have to run for it, Ralph," said Clif. "There is an open

scuttle not far from here which leads to an empty house, and once there we are sure—"

At that instant the light from a dark lantern was flashed across the boys, and a stern voice cried out:

"Halt there, or I'll fire. Hallo there, my men, here they are."

"Down here!" cried Ralph, throwing open the scuttle of a house upon the roof of which they were standing.

Then pulling Clif after him, the plucky fellow descended, drawing the scuttle after him, and in a moment they were both in the hallway of a tenanted house, the occupants of which began to make an outcry and raise an alarm of burglars.

"Never mind them," said Ralph, hastily, dashing down-stairs. "We have got away so far, and don't propose to be captured now. I have work to do yet, and nothing shall stop me."

"We'll see about that!" cried a voice, and as Ralph turned he saw a stout-built man rush out from a room close at hand, bearing a loaded revolver and a lighted lamp.

Without stopping to think of the consequences, but having in mind only his own escape and vindication, Ralph struck the man a stunning blow between the eyes and felled him like an ox.

"It don't do to be on the same track with me, my friend," he said, "for there is sure to be a collision, and my engine isn't the one to be smashed either."

Then leaping down the stairs at two bounds, Ralph quickly unfastened the door, and rushed out into the dark and deserted streets, closely followed by Clif.

"Where to now, Ralph?"

"To prove to those who have doubted me that I can do my duty as well now as ever."

"You won't go back to Brandford?" asked Clif, with some alarm.

"Not yet. The stolen property is yet to be recovered. My reputation depends upon it. Ah, Clif, you wouldn't have taken that false step if you had known the trouble it would cause me, would you?"

The other made no reply, and Ralph set off at a break-neck pace, soon leaving the little town behind him.

"Where are you going?" asked Clif.

"To find Jack Friel and make him disgorge. No time is to be lost. So, if you are coming along, make haste."

CHAPTER X.

THE PLOTTERS—WORKING IN VAIN—THE WRECK AND THE COLLISION—
THE RESCUE.

"STEADY now, Joe. Lift your end a bit and we'll have it down in good shape."

"All right, Jack. This will be a good haul, besides stopping the cops."

"Yes, they think they've got us sure this time, sending special detectives on ahead by the night trains. It's lucky you overheard 'em."

"Oh, I'm always around when such things are going on. Besides that, I've a friend on the force. He won't be on this train. He knows too much."

"There now, drop your end, so. That does it. Now wedge that bit of iron in as tight as you can. That will fix it."

"You bet, and when the engine strikes that away she goes and spills herself all over the track."

The two speakers were the outlaw, Jack Friel, and a pal of his called Joe Blunt, who, in the absence of Friel, usually acted as Friel's right-hand man, being shrewd and daring, and ready for any unlawful deed.

As intimated, he had got wind of a plan of the police of Brandford to capture Jack and the members of his gang still at large, and he and his leader had determined to wreck the train and then rob the passengers, thereby killing two birds with one stone.

The place where the two men were at their devilish work was a deserted spot shut in by high banks and woods, situated on the South-eastern Railway a few miles from the town whence Ralph had made his escape, and about a mile from the nearest station.

At this point there was a double track, and across one of these the two villains had laid a heavy sleeper, wedging it in well between the rails so that it could not easily be dislodged by the coming trains.

Besides the special police who were expected, there were several parties of excursionists and commercial travelers, and the chance of getting considerable plunder during the confusion of the wreck was a very good one.

The night was dark and gloomy, but just through a break in the hills could be seen the station in the distance with its red and green lights, its windows shining like stars, and the lanterns of the station men as they walked about, shining like Jack-o'-lanterns.

It was a pretty sight for the lover of the picturesque, but Friel and his chum had no eyes for such things, and they thought of nothing but the present job.

"Give that spike another rap with your sledge, Joe," said Friel, at length. "Drive her home, and don't make no noise about it either."

Joe raised his sledge, the end of which had been wrapped about with old rags in order that the ring of the steel would not be heard, and with one adroit blow secured the sleeper more securely in its place.

Friel surveyed the obstruction with an air of satisfaction, and then wedged in a large splinter, midway between two rails, and projecting a foot or so above them in front of the sleeper already laid down.

This he drove in firmly, thus strengthening the barrier already made, and then, with a chuckle, glancing toward the little station, said, briefly:

"That will settle the business. Come away a bit, and wait for the show."

They had proceeded a few paces when Joe suddenly stopped, and said in a hoarse whisper:

"Hark!"

"What's up?"

"I hear footsteps."

"Where away?"

"Close behind."

"Do you see any one?"

"No."

"Listen again."

"They have stopped."

"Drop into the bush and skin away. If they don't discover our work it's all right, and if they do we'll pop out upon them."

"No, they are passing."

"That's good, then."

"I say, Jack?"

"Well?"

"We had better keep away after all. It'll be easy enough to run in after the crash comes."

"Hark!"

"What's the row now?"

"Don't you hear the whistle?"

"Aye! She is nearing the station, and will be here shortly, and then, look out for a racket!"

—
"Don't you hear someone, Ralph, ahead of us?"

"I thought so, and just now I fancied I saw two figures skulking along through yonder cut. They may be tramps, but I am afraid—" "That they are officers?"

"No, not that."

"What then?"

"Some of these outlaws. The place is a wild one, and just the right kind for an ambush."

"Sh! There they go now! They are not officers, certainly."

"Stop where you are, Clif. Now, drop down. That's it. Don't look about you. Come along with me!"

The two companions, safe from pursuit, had come upon the scene soon after Friel and Joe had left, and it was they whom the latter had observed.

One swift glance had shown Ralph the obstruction on the track, but guessing rightly that they were watched, he had drawn Clif past before the latter observed it, in order not to arouse the suspicion of the men who had placed it there, and then took a detour which placed him out of sight of the outlaws.

"Clif," he said, suddenly, hurrying his friend back to the spot, "there has been some devil's work going on here to-night, but thank Heaven we shall be in time to prevent it."

"What do you mean?"

Ralph hastily told him what he had seen, and by that time they had regained the spot.

"Hark!" cried Clif.

"My God, it is the train!"

"And see! It has left the station yonder!"

"It will be wrecked! For the love of God help me, or we shall be too late!"

The two young fellows threw themselves upon the sleeper and tried frantically to remove it.

In vain were their efforts, for it resisted all their attacks, while nearer and nearer swept the doomed train.

"Once more, Clif! It must yield this time!"

They dug their hands under the sleeper and tugged and pulled for dear life, but to no purpose.

The cold sweat rolled from their foreheads and arms; the blood started from Ralph's bruised hands, while his very heart seemed to cease its beating.

Rattle, rattle, rattle!

Puff, puff!

Chew, chew, chew—toot!

"Once more, for God's sake!"

Pull and tug, sweat and groan, toil and wrestle as they would, they could but stir the obstruction a few inches, while, almost upon them now, swept the iron monster, its blazing eye throwing their figures into strong relief, its hot breath almost fanning their cheeks, its throbs setting their own hearts to beating with renewed force.

Too late, for strive as they will, it is upon them now, and naught can save it from destruction!

Ralph raises his voice in shrill accents, the tones rising high above the roar and rattle and shriek of the engine, and, in terror-stricken words, calls upon the engineer to stop.

The man hears, and, glancing along the illuminated track, sees the danger which impends.

He raises his hand to shove in the throttle, but the sense of terror unnerves him, and it falls paralyzed at his side.

The two lads spring away, there being now nothing that can be done, and the engine leaps the intervening space.

Thud!

Smash!

Crash!

Whish-sh!

The heavy engine drives full tilt against the obstruction, and comes to a violent halt.

The smoke-stack, unable to stand the sudden shock, reels and falls in a wreck upon the track, while the escaping steam fairly blinds one.

The engine is derailed, and falls upon the other track, the tender and baggage-car following.

The boiler bursts, and fragments of iron and steel are thrown to a great distance, the two boys narrowly escaping a serious hurt.

To add to the horror of the scene, the wrecked train catches on fire, and the passengers, imprisoned in the piles of rubbish thrown upon the track, call piteously for help.

There are delicate women and tender children in the train, and their sufferings, both mental and physical, are beyond description.

There are strong men, in the very prime and vigor of life, and to these death is a terrible thing, and above all, such a death as this.

Many have been killed outright, for the shock has been a violent one, and many are wounded past recovery; but there are still a goodly number who have sustained no injury, and these spring at once to the assistance of their less fortunate companions.

The engineer and fireman have been killed outright, and one or two brakemen injured seriously. But Ralph knows what to do, and he dashes at once into the thickest of the confusion, bringing order out of chaos, directing this party and that, dispatching a couple yonder to aid that woman and her children, directing attention to this group on the right, and calling for help for the inmates of the broken coach in front of him, and, in short, acting with the utmost promptness and dispatch.

Scarcely a minute has elapsed since his coming upon the scene, although it seems an age, and the terror-stricken passengers are grouped around him upon the track, when the situation assumes a new and terrible aspect.

The shriek of an engine is heard, and turning his head, Ralph beholds a second train approaching upon the other track.

It is already littered with the debris of the first train, and a collision is inevitable.

Scattering the people right and left, the brave fellow clears the track, and leaps into one of the wrecked carriages just as the second train rushes up to its doom.

There is no time to stop, and in the instant that the engineer sees his danger it is upon him.

He tries to stop, but the pilot has already caught in the wreck of the first engine, and in a second the collision takes place.

There is a terrible crash, the engine splits in two, the cars are thrown from the rails, dashed against the bank, broken and shattered, and the awful scenes of the first wreck are repeated with ten-fold horror.

A young girl is in one of the parlor cars, and as it crashes over upon its side and catches fire from a mass of burning debris, she rushes to a breach and cries piteously for help.

Ralph hears her and darts forward, ax in hand, calling out encouragingly and bidding her be of good cheer.

He reaches the coach door, when the flames drive him back, and as he retreats, the poor girl utters a shrill cry of despair.

She is partly imprisoned in the coach, a mass of rubbish choking up the entrance and preventing her escape, and as the flames are spreading at a fearful rate, her situation is indeed a perilous one.

Stuffing a handkerchief into his mouth, Ralph grasps his ax more firmly in his hands and rushes forward at a different point.

Crash!

Crash!

The sharp blade of the ax goes crashing through the woodwork, and in a little while Ralph has made an opening large enough to admit his body.

He plies his weapon vigorously, and in a few moments has come in sight of the young girl, now nearly surrounded by flames.

A few more sturdy strokes, and all obstacles are cleared away, and now, a vent for the flames having been made by cutting a hole in the car roof, there is less danger to be apprehended than before.

Ralph gives one bound, seizes the trembling girl in his arms, and caring not for smoke or flame, dashes headlong through the fiery furnace which glows all around him, and reaches the outside in safety.

Many persons have been attracted to the spot by this time, and as Ralph appears with the unconscious form of the poor girl in his stalwart arms, a ringing cheer goes up from the crowd, and is repeated again and again, till every throat seems likely to split from continued cheering.

Someone brings a dipper of water from a little brook close by, and Ralph bathes the pale face of the young lady with it, and soon restores her to consciousness.

She remembers what has happened after a few moments, and turning to Ralph, asks him his name, that she may know who her preserver is.

The young fellow blushes, and replies, quietly:

"They call me Railroad Ralph. I run special trains on the South-eastern Railway. My other name is Wright. What I have done is nothing. Any one would have done the same."

"Any one means no one; but you were the someone who is to be depended upon in case of danger. I thank you for saving my life, and rest assured that I shall always be your friend, whatever happens."

"I have told you my name; will you favor me with yours, that I may know the name of her who has promised to be my friend?"

"My name is Jennie Everett, and my father lives in Brandford. You may have heard of him!"

"Mr. Everett, the banker?"

"The same."

"I am glad to have been the means of doing the daughter of so prominent a citizen a favor, but believe me, I should have done the same had you been the child of the humblest laborer in the city."

"I believe you, Ralph—you will let me call you that, since you have given me no other, and Mr. Wright seems so formal—and I can recognize your noble qualities at—"

"Please don't, Miss Everett," said Ralph, laughing. "I am not accustomed to being praised so heartily. Will you remain here a moment, while I return to the scene of the wreck?" for they had gone to a sheltered nook some rods distant. "There is work for me yet to do."

"It would be selfish for me to demand all your attentions at such a time."

"I will return again presently."

"Thank you, you are a noble—"

Ralph lost the rest of the sentence as he hurried away, and in a few moments he had regained the scene of action, and was as busy as a beaver, doing everything he could to alleviate the sufferings of those who had been rescued from the wrecked trains.

Clif had disappeared, and Ralph could see nothing of him, though he searched in every direction.

"By Jove!" he suddenly exclaimed; "I forgot to ask him how my handkerchief and cigar-case got in that safe-room at the office. Was that an accident, or was it designed to throw the blame on me?"

CHAPTER XI.

TROUBLED THOUGHTS—A NEW DANGER—THE WORK OF A HUMAN FIEND.

THE thought that perhaps someone had designed to throw the blame of the robbery upon him had not before entered Ralph's head, though he had intended to ask Clif how his handkerchief had come to be found in the place, but in the excitement of the events which had so crowded one upon the other that night, had forgotten to do so.

That his handkerchief should be found in the office was nothing in itself, for Clif might easily have taken it up by mistake when he and Ralph were conversing together in the eating-saloon, and have afterwards dropped it carelessly.

The cigar-case was another matter, however, and this could only have been taken from him with actual intent to fasten the guilt of the crime upon him.

Could Clif have been so base as to do this?

Ralph could not believe this, for, if so, why had he taken the risk of a jail-breaking in order to get Ralph out?

The case was a complicated one, certainly; but our hero had no chance to study it out then, as at the very moment that these thoughts were crossing his mind, he heard a piercing shriek in the direction whence he had just come.

His first thought was that the young lady he had rescued was threatened with some new danger, and dashing off toward the spot, he came upon the young girl herself struggling in the hands of a man who was evidently trying to carry her off.

Ralph leaped upon the villain and dealt him a stunning blow in the face, knocking off a black mask which he wore.

"Jack Friel, by all that's bad!" cried the lad. "Now, scoundrel, we meet again, and we shall see who makes the station first this trip. Down brakes, you villain!"

Friel seemed as much astonished as Ralph at this unexpected meeting, and for an instant stood staring at his plucky young opponent.

"This way, my lads!" cried Ralph. "Here is the notorious outlaw, Jack Friel, himself. Remember the reward!"

These words seemed to arouse the outlaw to a sense of his peril, and with a sudden movement, he broke away from Ralph, seized Jennie in his arms, and darted off up the track.

The poor girl uttered one terrified shriek for help, and then her cries were suddenly stifled, Friel having thrust a handkerchief into her mouth.

There was scarcely any light now, as the man had turned a sharp curve, the hills shutting out the illumination of the still burning trains, and the most profound darkness suddenly closed in upon him.

If Ralph could not see he could hear, for Friel's footsteps were easily distinguishable, the man wearing heavy boots, which gave out a considerable sound as they struck the gravel of the track.

Guided by hearing, therefore, and not by sight, Ralph followed the outlaw, presently making out his form just ahead, as his eyes became accustomed to the subdued light, or rather thick darkness.

Suddenly he missed Friel, and springing ahead to what he considered the proper distance, he suddenly paused and listened attentively.

He could hear footsteps to his right, and, turning sharply, he dashed off in their direction.

Of a sudden he felt that he had entered some tunnel, or perhaps an excavation in the bank, and he paused, as a vague sense of alarm swept over him.

In another moment he heard a derisive laugh, and then felt a pair of strong arms thrown around him from behind.

He was hurried along for some distance, and then his captor came to a sudden standstill, tightening his grip upon the young fellow, and saying in jubilant tones:

"He's cleverly trapped, Jack. Walked right into the spider's web with his eyes open. Fetch a rope there, till we truss him up."

The poor boy felt that he was again in the power of the arch villain Friel, and realized that it would go hard with him this time, as Friel would not readily forgive his interference in the plans of himself and pals.

He was soon securely bound, and then the outlaws showed a light, revealing to Ralph's astonished gaze a boarded chamber, which he knew must be considerably under ground.

There was no one about but the two outlaws, and there seemed to be no door leading into any room in which Jennie might have been imprisoned.

He was placed upon a rude bench, and then Friel said with a coarse laugh:

"You are a troublesome young fellow, do you know it?"

"To such as you, yes. Your kind and I don't run on the same line for a cent, and there's always a collision when we meet."

"There'll be a smash-up presently, you'll find," retorted Friel, adapting Ralph's characteristic language to his own case.

"Yes; and I know which engine will get the worst of it. It won't be the Wildcat, I can tell you."

"Don't crow, my lad, until you are out of the woods. You might not be able to stand the disappointment."

"I'll take care of myself, Mr. Jack. This was your work to-night, I fancy, wrecking these trains. You'll have a fine list of offenses to answer for some day. Do you care nothing for human life?"

"Not when it stands in the way of my plans!" answered the other, fiercely. "Do you know that I intend to kill you?" he continued, after a pause, fairly hissing the words from between his tightly-closed teeth.

"You are certainly capable of it," returned Ralph, coolly.

"And do you not beg for mercy?"

"From you?" asked Ralph, his eyes flashing, his breast heaving, the hot blood mounting to his temples, and his muscles standing out like whip-cords. "Beg mercy from you? Never!"

Friel bit his lip till the blood came, and Ralph continued:

"Ask mercy from such a wretch as you? Appeal to your better feelings? I am not so mad as to expect anything but the most fiendish cruelty from such a brute! Do your worst, monster! You will not see me flinch or tremble! Your record of crime is nearly done, and already the rope of the hangman is tightening about your throat!"

"Jack Friel the victim of the hangman! Never! The bullet, perhaps, may finish me, but never the rope," and the man laughed scornfully.

Then turning to Joe, who stood by all this time, he said, suggestively:

"We will see whether this young fellow's boasted powers are as strong as he thinks. We shall soon see whether he will flinch or not under our gentle persuasion!"

"What will it be, governor? The rope or the lancet?"

"Neither. Strangulation and blood-letting are too easy."

"How would stretching do?"

"That's good, but too quick. He wouldn't suffer enough."

"Drop him into a pit of quicklime?"

"That's not so bad, but it's too quick again. The minute he suffocates his agony is over."

"Cut him to pieces slowly. How is that?"

"It can't be prolonged enough, that's the trouble."

"Roast him over a slow fire. That will make him howl."

"Tain't bad enough."

"Give him the cat and rub saltpeter into the cuts."

"Pshaw! that won't kill him."

"Go on," cried Ralph, who had listened to this conversation, purposely prolonged in order to increase his suffering. "Complete the damnable catalogue. You are well versed in your art, I see. Name over all the most agonizing tortures you can think of, and yet you shall not see me flinch. Have you anything more to suggest?"

"By the fiend and all his imps, he's a cool one," muttered Joe. "However, I reckon we can fetch him. We'll try the water-cure on him."

"With the knife as a wind-up!"

"Aye, that will do the business first-rate. Let him rest a bit, for we might as well give him a chance to get ready for the fun. He ain't got no idea what it's like, you know."

"And he won't have either till it's all ready," answered Friel,

Joe's words having been said in tones which made it impossible for Ralph to catch their drift.

The light was suddenly put out, evidently for the purpose of covering the retreat of the outlaws, for, although Ralph knew that they had departed, he could not tell how or in what direction, there being evidently some secret exit which they did not care that he should discover.

"The caution is a needless one," thought Ralph, "if they intend to kill me, for of what use will the knowledge be to me, supposing I do acquire it, after I am dead?"

He waited in darkness for about an hour, though it seemed much longer, when he suddenly heard footsteps, and then felt himself lifted up and carried off to some distance.

He was then set down and a light was produced, when he found himself in a small apartment, evidently dug out of the ground, the walls being of earth and covered with moisture and green slime.

It was not a large place, and by the light of a lantern, hung from a beam set into the wall, he saw a strange sort of instrument, the use of which he could not altogether determine.

There was a sort of bench placed against an upright post, smooth and square, at the top of which there was an iron lever, upon one end of which hung an ordinary garden watering-pot of unusual size.

The other end of the lever was covered by a piece of canvas, which concealed whatever might be attached to it, and Ralph could only guess that it was some instrument of torture, though exactly what he could not make out.

There was but one entrance to the place, and this was low and dark, and to all appearances the only means of exit, though that did not trouble him so much as the nature of the curious apparatus against the wall, upon which his eyes fastened with an irresistible fascination.

He could not take his gaze from it, try how he would and by degrees a shadowy sense of terror grew upon him, and he seemed to feel that this was the means by which his death was to be compassed.

Shaking off the uncomfortable feeling by a supreme effort, he laughed lightly, and said in as cool a tone as he could command:

"What have you got there, Friel? A new kind of watering apparatus?"

"You'll find out directly, my lad," answered the man, as he took off the covering and fumbled about a bit.

Then Ralph saw the use of the strange machine in an instant.

On the end of the lever opposite that which had the water-pot was a knife, kept in place by the weight of the water, which, however, was now beginning to run out, and would in time lighten, so as to detach a ratchet and send the knife gliding down the upright upon the head of the occupant of the bench, for that he was to be fastened upon it under the knife was now perfectly clear to the lad's mind.

Another feature of the grim instrument of death now attracted Ralph's attention, and this was the disposition of the water which acted as a weight to the knife.

The vessel was so arranged that, drop by drop, the water would fall directly upon the head of the victim, thus putting him in torture, long drawn out, until the knife, freed from its place of confinement, should mercifully put an end to his agony.

Any one knows that water falling slowly, drop by drop, upon the head, soon produces the most maddening pain, resulting, if continued long enough, in raving insanity and death.

Prepared as he was for something terrible, Ralph had no idea that Friel would resort to such diabolical cruelty as this, and for an instant his brain reeled at the thought of the agony he was doomed to suffer.

"Is this your work, Jack Friel?" he asked, in hoarse tones.

"Yes. What do you think of it?"

"That it is worthy of the arch fiend himself; and that, compared to you in ingenuity, he is but a prattling fool."

"Good enough," answered Friel, with that fiendish laugh of his. "You'll find I am no dabster at this sort of business. Stick him on the bench, Joe."

In an instant the poor boy was seized, pinioned to the bench with his back against the upright, and the devilish contrivance set to work.

"God help me!" muttered Ralph, under his breath. "This is, indeed, the work of a human fiend!"

CHAPTER XII.

RALPH'S FURTHER ADVENTURES, AND WHAT HE SAW AND HEARD.

Spat! Spat! Spat!

Drop by drop, drop by drop, the water fell upon Ralph's head, striking the one spot always—for he was powerless to change his position—and slowly but surely increasing in its horrible effect.

Drip! Drip! Drip!

Steadily and pitilessly it falls, and now the poor boy's head seems swelling to an enormous size. His eyes start from their sockets, everything swims before him, and the drops, as they fall, seem as heavy as lead.

It is no longer drip, drip, but thud, thud, every drop seeming to bore a hole into his brain, and with each succeeding drop the agony increases.

Friel and his companion have gone, leaving the light burning, but the brave fellow makes no outcry, feeling that the brutes are within call, and waiting to hear his groans that they may taunt him.

The pain is unendurable, and Ralph gives way under it, becoming unconscious after having born the torture unflinchingly for a long time.

As he sat there unconscious, the water trickling down upon his bare head, the weighted knife above him began to tremble, and it could be easily seen that many minutes would not be required before it would come crashing down, and at once put an end to the boy's agony.

With all his ingenuity, Friel had not exactly calculated the time it would take for the water to run out enough to trip the lever supporting the weight, and the catastrophe was, therefore, nearer at hand than he supposed.

Not anticipating, however, that the end would come for at least half an hour, and intending to be present at the time, he had gone outside with Joe to reconnoiter.

While he was away it happened that Jennie, who had not been confined as securely as she might have been, endeavored to make her escape, but missing the right path, entered the chamber where Ralph was secured.

In an instant she realized the horrible nature of the apparatus before her and springing upon the bench she tore away the vessel holding the water and threw it upon the floor.

The knife, freed from its incumbrance, began to descend with lightning-like rapidity, and for an instant the boy's life was in deadly peril.

With rare presence of mind, however, the young girl seized the weight attached to it, and at once arrested its progress.

Not a second too soon, however, for an instant's delay would have proved fatal, as, when stopped in its course, it was within an inch of Ralph's head.

Holding it aloft she detached it from the lever, and threw it from her with a feeling of disgust and horror, for she saw stains upon its blade which could only have been made by human blood.

Quickly descending, she deftly untied the many cords which secured the hapless lad, and then dragging him away from the dreadful spot, laid him upon the ground and tried to restore him.

She loosened his collar, bathed his throbbing forehead, chafed his hands, and otherwise ministered to his wants, so that in about ten minutes' time she had the pleasing satisfaction of seeing him open his eyes and look about him in a dazed manner, as if trying to recall what had happened.

He was still delirious, and began to talk incoherently, at the same time struggling to rise.

She spoke reassuringly, but finding that he was not bound he sprang to his feet, and in an instant had bounded out of the apartment, leaving his preserver alone.

Not knowing whither he was going, he rushed along the passages, dashing aside doors which came in his way, until he reached the place where Friel had first set him down.

Here he met the outlaw himself just entering, and at sight of him Friel gave utterance to a frightful oath, and sprang upon him like a tiger.

Ralph seemed to recognize the ruffian, and shaking him off as though he had been an infant, threw him headlong on the floor and dashed from the place, soon reaching the open air, where he paused not an instant, but bounded along the track until, exhausted by his efforts, he sank senseless upon the ground beside the track, and knew

no more until he awoke and found the morning sun shining in his face.

He had no idea where he was except that he was upon the railroad, but how far from any station he might be was a mystery, as well as in what direction the nearest one was, so confused was he by his strange adventures.

He was still somewhat feverish and light-headed, feeling greatly the need of rest and refreshment, his limbs being stiff and swollen, and his head swimming about in the most uncomfortable fashion.

It had rained in the night since he had fallen down; so much so, in fact, that his clothes were wringing wet, and where he had lain a large puddle had formed from the formation of streams coursing down the steep bank.

There was clearly no need of stopping where he was, and he therefore picked himself up, wrung the water from his clothes as much as possible, and started off at random along the track.

He had proceeded for, say, a quarter of a mile, without meeting any one, when he came to quite a considerable washout that had been formed by the rain.

The soil had been carried away from beneath the track, and the ties and rails sagged down most alarmingly, it being imminently perilous for him to bear his own weight upon them, and much more so, of course, for an engine to attempt to cross.

"This must be seen to at once," was his first thought. "They can't know about this, and if I mistake not, there is an early morning train over this very place. They can't pass the scene of the wreck, to be sure, but they will not know of this place, as I see no signal up. This must be attended to immediately."

Whoo-oo-oo!

His surmises have been correct, and there is a train approaching even at this moment.

He listens attentively, and hears the rattle of the wheels and the puff of the engine, the wind being fresh this morning.

It is coming towards him, of that he is certain and, suddenly inspired with new strength, he dashes on, tearing the coat from his back as he does so, and shouting out a warning to the coming train.

He runs like a deer over the rough road-bed, and presently sees the train bearing down upon him at full speed, from around a sharp curve.

He stands right in the middle of the track, and waving his coat, frantically cries, with all the lung power of which he is capable:

"Stop, stop, or you will be lost. Stop! for Heaven's sake, stop!"

On comes the engine, threatening him with instant death, but still he does not budge an inch from his position.

They may not see or hear him, and then he will be crushed to death under the great wheels, but he has his duty to perform, and right manfully he stands to it.

It matters not to him if he perishes providing he saves the train, and so he stands there, shouting and gesticulating in the wildest manner, while on and on sweeps the train, the engineer seeming all unconscious of that strange figure on the track, or if he sees it, fancying, perhaps, that it is some madman or tramp, who will presently step aside and give room to the fiery monster bearing down upon him.

Toot! Ah, he is seen then, and the engineer is warning him off.

He does not budge, however, and presently the engineer sounds the call for down brakes, and the men fly to their posts.

Then, and only then, does Ralph desert his position, and it is time, for as he steps aside, the train sweeps by him at a reduced speed, and presently comes to a stop.

He runs back, and as he reaches the engine, the fireman leans over and says:

"What's up?"

"Big wash-out just ahead."

"Is that so?" asks the engineer. "We have heard nothing about it. You look as if you had been washed out yourself. No joking now or you'll get the worst of it."

"I am not joking. If you don't believe me, run ahead a little, and see for yourself. I'll go with you."

He tried to climb into the engine, but his strength has given out now, and if the fireman had not sprung forward as he did he would have fallen under the wheels.

"Poor fellow," says the engineer, assisting him to a seat, "why, you are all done out, to be sure. Who are you?"

"Ralph Wright."

"What! Railroad Ralph, of the South-eastern?"

"The same."

"I've heard bad stories of you, my lad. They say you have been plotting with Friel and his gang, and that you broke jail last night."

"I don't care what they say," answered Ralph, fiercely. "Go ahead, and see if I have told you the truth or not. People will talk, and there is no use trying to stop them."

"They say uglier things than that, too," continued the engineer, starting up again.

Ralph paid no attention, passing his hand wearily across his forehead, and the man went on:

"They say that you have killed a man in a house that you broke into after getting out of jail. The papers have all got out specials about it."

"It is false. I struck him down, indeed, but did not kill him. He was too big."

"You didn't have a knife, then?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because the fellow had a bad knife wound in his side; one, too, that will—"

"Speak out!" cried Ralph, excitedly. "The man is dead?"

"Yes."

"Then I swear before Heaven that someone else has done this to fasten the guilt upon me. Ah, go slower; don't you see that wash-out now? You see I was not deceiving you."

"No, my lad, I see you were not. You are a brave fellow, and I do not believe, after this, that you are capable of doing the things they say you did. But you broke jail?"

"I was put there unjustly. However, don't let's talk about that. Here we are, and that's all you want of me."

So saying, Ralph leaped from the engine before either of the men could stop him, and sprang away, excitement being all that nerved him, for he was very weak and exhausted.

He got away through a breach in the bank, and ran on until he came to a house where he found a sort of shed at the back, and lay down to sleep.

He awoke some time later, and was just going around to the front, when he saw Jack Friel enter with a number of packages under his arm.

He was unobserved himself, and when Friel had gone, he looked up and saw that the place was an express office.

He crawled to a window which was partly up, and listening attentively, heard Friel run off a number of addresses to which the packages were to be sent at once.

The whole thing was plain in an instant.

Friel was shipping the tickets in small lots to men along the line of the rival railroads to be sold at once before the rates should go up! Ralph was never without a lead pencil, and it was in his fingers in an instant.

He had no note-book, but the clapboards of the house served for that, and he copied down everyone of the addresses as fast as they were given.

As he knew the names of the towns, this was not troublesome, as all he had to look after was the name of the man at each, and as the ones given were mostly agents, this was in Ralph's favor, too, and he did not miss a single address.

When the business had been transacted, the packages put on the shelves to be dispatched, and Friel had departed, Ralph crept away, and waited until he was out of sight.

He knew that the agent must be in league with Friel, and so dared not say anything to him, but resolving to baffle the villain yet, although the task would be more difficult, he made his way toward the station, saying:

"If I have to give myself up and suffer punishment for crimes I never committed, I will yet outwit this scoundrel!"

CHAPTER XIII.

RUMORS—A DARING EXPERIMENT—THE MANIAC.

THERE was great excitement in Brandford when it was heard that one of the prisoners had broken jail, and Mr. Merritt, who had returned to the city after his unsatisfactory interview with Ralph, was thunderstruck at the boy's rashness, for he knew that it was he who had got away, from the descriptions given of him in the papers.

He was distressed to think that Ralph had broken jail, for, knowing nothing of Clif's intervention, he supposed, of course, that it had been Friel's doing, and now, more than ever, was strengthened in his belief of Ralph's guilt, which, to do him credit, he had somewhat doubted after his last interview.

He was doubly pained, because Ralph had always been a favorite of his, and because if Ralph went wrong, he could not see whom he could trust, his faith in man being shaken at finding, as he supposed, his particular favorite to be wanting in those qualities which one demands most in business—honesty and faithfulness.

If Ralph had betrayed his trust, then whom could be confide in after that?

These were the thoughts which troubled him, and caused him more uneasiness than he was willing to admit, for he had reason to suspect more than one of those about him; and to find Ralph among the number, after having trusted him so greatly, was galling in the extreme.

He was about setting out for the scene of the wreck of the previous night, having heard of the great bravery of a certain young man whom nobody seemed to know, he having since disappeared, when a man entered his private room unannounced, and, taking a seat, said:

"Don't go yet, sir; I want to talk to you."

"You will have to be quick about it, then," replied Mr. Merritt, shortly, "for I am called away upon business of importance."

"And I have come upon such."

"State it."

"You have lately lost a valuable packet from the office?"

"Indeed?"

"Come, come," said the visitor, suddenly throwing aside a gray wig and beard and changing his voice; "there is no need of secrecy, so let's talk the thing over sensibly."

"Can I believe my eyes? Ralph, is this indeed you?"

"It is no one else."

"Do you know the danger you run in thus venturing about?"

"No one will know me, if you were deceived."

"No, the disguise is perfect, and yet—"

"Surely you would not betray me?"

"I might be obliged to, Ralph. Duty, you know—"

"Enough of this," cried the youth, impetuously.

"You will still misunderstand me, I see. Now to prove that I bear you no ill will, despite your suspicions."

Mr. Merritt said nothing, and Ralph continued:

"I can tell you where all the missing property is."

"You have relented, then?"

"No, for I always said I would get it back, and I say so still."

"If you do that I will overlook your first fault."

"I don't intend to go into that, Mr. Merritt. I have told you that I did not steal the stuff, although I knew that it had been stolen. More than that, I will say that I know the thief, but I have sworn, ill-advisedly perhaps, to shield him, and neither you nor any one else shall make me break my oath."

He looked particularly handsome and manly as he said this, carried away by his feelings, and the superintendent could not but admire him, and began to think once more that it could not be possible for such a manly fellow to be a thief.

"Enough of this," continued Ralph, recovering himself. "Read this list," handing the other a copy of that list which he had made out upon the side of the house, just outside the express office.

"What is this?"

"The list of persons to whom Friel had sent the stolen tickets."

"How did you get it?"

Ralph told him, and then said:

"I am going to get that stuff all back in a lump by a piece of strategy. Meanwhile you must assist me."

"How so?"

"By giving private orders that none of the old tickets are to be taken. Have new ones struck off, with some distinctive mark upon them, such as a red cross or colored corners, or something not easily counterfeited, and have no others taken at the stations."

"And the purloined tickets?"

"I will recover them. If I do not they will be of no use to the thieves."

"And they are—"

"Jack Friel and his pals."

"But they did not enter the offices. The work was not done by skilled burglars. Detectives have proved that."

"Detectives?" gasped Ralph. "Have you had detectives on the case?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope they will prove my innocence, that is all," answered the young fellow, beginning to feel alarmed lest Clif's secret should be discovered after all.

"How are you going to get back the stolen property?" asked Mr. Merritt.

"That is my affair. Will you give me *carte blanche* to do as I see fit in the matter?"

"I can't do that, seeing that you are still—"

"Oh, very well. I see that you still doubt me. I shall run on my own track, then, make or break. The day will come when you will trust me better. I have nothing further to say. Good-morning."

Ralph was away before the superintendent could stop him, and when the latter reached the street, a moment later, not a trace of the daring boy was to be seen.

Ralph's first step was to go to the main office of the telegraph company in Bransford and send to each of the men on his list the following telegram:

"Please return the stuff I sent you to Crosstown. Not safe to use it. Address it to Ralph Wright. He is right, and no mistake."

"J. F."

Crosstown was a small junction where two or three railroads met, and Ralph knew the station agent well, and, more than that, knew him to be a trustworthy man, and one that would do all in his power to assist him.

After he had sent the dispatches—there being quite a number of them—he wrote a letter to the agent at Crosstown, which, after giving the list of towns from which he expected packages, continued as follows:

"When the packages are all in, make one bundle of them and send them here—not to my name, as that would not be safe at present, but to W. Richards. It's all square, and I'll tell you the whole story when I see you. Reckon up the whole bill, and put it in the charges."

"Yours,
"RALPH."

When he had sent the letter, Ralph at once left Bransford, where he ran a great risk of being discovered, and struck out for the next town, taking the railroad in preference to the highway.

He had been on the track but a few minutes when he came suddenly upon a wild-cat engine, with two cars attached, standing upon the main track.

He was about to pass quickly, in order to avoid all chance of discovery, when it struck him that something was wrong, and he hastily turned his head and looked into the engine.

At first he thought it was empty, but going nearer he saw the engineer sitting in his place, looking perfectly unconcerned, although Ralph knew well that trains were constantly passing upon the main line, and that if the wild-cat remained where it was there was danger of a collision.

He climbed nimbly into the cab, and there discovered the fireman lying insensible upon a heap of coals in the tender, while the fixed stare of the engineer told him at once that the man was totally unconscious of what was going on about him.

Thinking that perhaps the man was drunk—for too many of the Southeastern engineers were addicted to habits of intoxication—Ralph shook him, when he was horrified to see the man fall to the floor utterly senseless.

With a nameless terror animating him, Ralph felt the man's pulse, and passed his hands over the man's face.

Horror! The man was not drunk, but dead!

Putting aside the question of how the man had met his death, Ralph turned at once to arouse the fireman, having noticed signs of life about him.

The fellow had evidently been engaged in a severe struggle, for he was bleeding, and seemed to draw his breath with difficulty.

He had succeeded in arousing the man to consciousness, and had put him one or two questions, when the sounds denoting the approach of a train on the main line told him plainer than words could do, that his sphere of action lay in another direction for the present.

There was no one to help him, the cars being empty, and what was to be done must be accomplished at once, or a frightful catastrophe would happen.

There was still steam up on the engine, and Ralph, being thoroughly at home here, soon had the satisfaction of feeling the huge body moving beneath him.

There was a switch just ahead, and starting up the engine at a moderate speed, he ran ahead, and threw down the bar so as to let his train take the siding.

The other train was in sight, as the wildcat glided upon the side track, and Ralph was obliged to remain at his post until he could readjust the switch for the regular train.

He accomplished this not a moment too soon, and then started on the run for the wild engine, which had suddenly increased its speed in the most unaccountable manner. Ralph's first thought was that he had left the throttle open wider than he had intended, and that the fire, gaining in intensity, had increased the pressure of steam, and in that way accelerated the speed.

He was certain, after a moment's reflection, that this could not be the case, but as the train was increasing in speed there was danger of

an accident at the other end of the siding, which, by the way, was a long one, and Ralph increased his own speed accordingly.

There was little chance of reaching the head of the train in time, but the rear car was comparatively near, and clearing the intervening space in a few seconds, the daring young fellow seized the iron guards and quickly drew himself up, being well used to scrambling about freight cars and therefore no more liable to accident than if he were on the ground.

Meanwhile the train had greatly increased its speed, and Ralph fairly flew along the tops of the cars, until he came to the tender, when he jumped down and made his way to the cab.

As he reached it he saw that the fireman, evidently out of his head, had thrown the throttle wide open, and was fast rushing to destruction.

One rapid movement served to close it, another to throw the lever amidships, and the third to clap on the safety-brakes, with which, most fortunately, the engine was provided.

These precautions were taken none too soon, for the engine came to a dead halt not one foot away from the end of the siding.

The switch being arranged for the regular trains, the engine must certainly have been derailed had Ralph been a minute later, and realizing his escape, the young fellow drew a deep sigh of relief as the iron horse ceased to plunge along the track.

Turning around, he saw the fireman staring at him in the most insane manner, grating his teeth and rolling his eyes most horribly.

His lips were covered with foam, his muscles moved nervously, and from between his set teeth came incoherent sounds, although his eyes spoke too plainly and said, so that there could be no mistaking the words:

"The man is mad!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Ralph, "the fellow is crazy, and it is he that has murdered the engineer. God protect me from such a fiend!"

At that instant the man, evidently aroused by Ralph's words, hissed forth something utterly unintelligible, and rushed upon our hero with open arms, clutching him at once in a fell embrace, and seeking to hurl him from the engine.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DESPERATE STRUGGLE—EXPLANATIONS—IN THE TUNNEL.

Poor Ralph was in a sad plight, for, wearied as he was with his previous exertions, he felt that he was no match for the maniac, who was much stronger than he, to begin with.

Secondly, the man had the advantage of position, for, Ralph's arms being pinned to his side, he could make no resistance.

He felt himself being pushed towards the side of the cab, and knowing that there was a steep embankment close behind the switch, gave himself up for lost, as it was evidently the maniac's intention to hurl him down the bank.

If he could not use his hands, his feet were certainly not hampered, and suddenly throwing out his left, he tripped his antagonist, and both fell heavily to the floor just inside the steps leading to the ground.

Ralph was uppermost, and his right hand becoming loosened, he drew back, and dealt his opponent a blow between the eyes that fairly stunned him.

This gave him an opportunity to get clear from the fellow, and quickly scrambling to his feet, he took the unconscious form and bore it to a place of safety.

He could see nothing of the engineer, and came to the conclusion that the other had thrown him off during that wild ride.

He ran back slowly, but could find nothing of the body, a fact which greatly puzzled him.

He was in a greater dilemma than that, however, for here he was in possession of an engine for which there was no fireman or engineer, and the destination of which he could not guess at.

It would not do to go away and leave it standing on the track, and to take it back to the yard at Bransford might imperil his own safety, so that he was clearly in a quandary.

"It is my duty to inform the railroad authorities of what has happened," thought he, "and whether I run into danger or not, I must do what is right. I shall take the train back to the yard and tell them how I found it."

Arranging the switch to suit him, wondering at the time that it should be left open, and resolving to speak about it, he ran the train upon the main line, and, readjusting the switch, kept on until he reached the yard.

Here he briefly explained to the men he met what had occurred, and was about to go away when he heard Mr. Merritt's voice, and, turning about, saw that gentleman approaching.

There was no chance of escaping now, so Ralph, making up his mind to face the music, said coolly:

"You heard what has happened?"

"Yes, and I want someone to take that train on to Bransford, get a load of stuff awaiting shipment there and then return; will you do it?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?" asked Mr. Merritt, in evident surprise.

"You would not trust me just now, and so how can I be assured that this is not a trap set for me?"

"You wrong me, Ralph."

"You wronged me before. No, I cannot accept any trust until I have proven my innocence. If you had not doubted me it would have been different; but now I am in another situation. Besides, I have work to do. Good-morning."

Then he walked rapidly away, being quickly hidden behind an incoming train.

There was one just going out at that moment, and though it was moving quite rapidly, he boarded it, and entering one of the coaches, took a seat by a window and looked out.

Suddenly the person in front of him turned around, and looking him in the face, said in a whisper:

"Is that you, Ralph?"

It was Clif Wayne who asked the question, and Ralph, motioning him to take a seat beside himself, said:

"How did you catch on to my identity? Merritt couldn't penetrate the disguise."

"Oh, I knew your eyes, Ralph. There are none like them anywhere. What's up?"

Ralph quickly told him what had happened, and then asked:

"What became of you the other night? You disappeared most mysteriously."

"Why, I was busy helping people out of the wreck; and I missed you as well."

"The wreck? Were you there?"

"To be sure; don't you remember?"

"No."

"Well, I was, all the same."

"Oh, I say, old fellow," said Ralph, suddenly, "how in the name of common sense did my cigar case get in the railway company's office?"

Clif flushed for an instant and looked decidedly uncomfortable, but quickly rallying he replied glibly:

"You gave it to me to take a weed from when we were in the eating saloon. I was flurried and stuck it in my pocket, and of course had to get nervous and drop it on the floor when I was going for those tickets; left some of my own property behind, too!"

"Yes, your self-respect," answered Ralph, reproachfully.

"How did my handkerchief come there, Clif? I did not lend you that also?"

"Your handkerchief?"

"Yes; it was found in the place, together with my cigar case."

"The dence! I had not heard about that."

"How do you account for it?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"It makes the thing look bad for me, don't it? The evidence would seem to point to me as the thief."

Clif said nothing, and Ralph proceeded:

"I have shielded you, Clif Wayne, at the cost of my own reputation, because I gave you my word to say nothing about your part of this distressing affair. Must I now be compelled to tell, myself, that you have been acting the part of a scoundrel, that you have been trying to throw the blame upon me, having already sealed my lips?"

Clif's face was as pale as death, his breath seeming scarcely to move, while his eyes were averted, and the convulsive motions of his lips indicated great mental distress.

"Is this true?" continued Ralph. "If so, be man enough to do me justice. You need have no fear of my breaking my oath, for nothing shall force your secret from me. Henceforth, however, we cease to be friends."

"Oh, Ralph, you cannot believe me so base!" cried Clif. "You know I am your friend in all things."

"I only know that there are suspicious circumstances which you and you only can explain. Instead of doing so, you say nothing."

"What shall I say?"

"How my handkerchief got in the safe-room!"

"How do you know it did? Was that in the papers?"

"Merritt told me so."

"Merritt? Why, he has doubted you all along, you have told me. Don't you see his object in telling you that?"

"No."

"In order to make you confess, thinking you to be guilty."

"By Jove, it is just like him," cried Ralph, remembering in his bitterness that Mr. Merritt had doubted him.

"That is it, and it shows me just how contemptible he is. Then, you know nothing of the handkerchief?"

"No, and I don't believe it was found at all. You remember lending me the cigar-case?"

"No, but very likely I did do so. Forgive me for distrusting you, Clif, but everything goes wrong just now, and I don't feel myself."

"Say no more about it, old fellow. I can't blame you, though you know that I would do anything for you."

"I know you would, Clif," answered Ralph, and the two exchanged a warm hand pressure, Clif saying presently, as the whistle sounded:

"I must get off at this station, Ralph."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hunt for that young lady I rescued the other night, and then get back those tickets."

"How will you do that?"

"Go to Brandford and get 'em."

"Better go to Crosstown."

"Perhaps."

"That will be better than Brandford."

"I believe you're right. I'll go there instead of having them sent to Brandford."

"Well, old man, good-day. I'll see you again. Take care of yourself, and clear this matter up as soon as you can."

Then he went out of the car, the train being about to stop, and Ralph was left alone, having really very little idea of what he intended

to do, besides getting out of the way of Mr. Merritt and his blood hounds, as he considered them.

Despite Clif's explanation, he felt a vague uneasiness, and could not altogether satisfy himself that things were all right, seeming to feel that his troubles were by no means ended, though in what direction he was to expect mishaps he could not tell.

He sat thus musing for about an hour, when suddenly looking up he noticed, by the country he was going through, that he had passed by a considerable distance the town at which he had meant to stop.

There was another station in a few minutes, however, and, thinking he would have a smoke in the meantime, got up and passed through the car.

As he reached the platform, and was about to cross to the next car, a man came out of the latter and stood before him.

Both uttered exclamations of surprise, for each recognized in the other a former enemy.

The new-comer was Ned, Jack Friel's best man, whom Ralph supposed to be still in jail, and it was no wonder, therefore, that he was surprised at seeing him aboard the train.

"Hallo, young fellow, it's you, is it? I haven't forgot the crack on the shoulder you gave me when you chucked that rock down on me. Now I'm going to get even with you."

"You'll get into the hands of the police, that's where you'll get," said Ralph. "Hallo there, somebody."

With an oath Ned rushed upon Ralph, and while he prevented his further alarming the passengers, tried to throw him from the platform.

As the two grappled right between the coaches the train was suddenly plunged into the blackest darkness.

"My God! it is the long tunnel!" was Ralph's sudden thought.

This long tunnel, which he knew well, was five miles in length and unlighted at any part, the darkness being most intense from end to end on account of sharp curves at either entrance.

The cars, too, were not provided with lighted lamps, and the run would therefore be made in the dark, therefore adding to the horror of the situation.

Ralph could hear Ned chuckle as he tightened his grip, for the darkness would favor him, preventing any of the brakemen or passengers from seeing what was going on and coming to the rescue of the imperiled lad.

"Let 'em look for you in the tunnel!" hissed Ned, "for that's where you'll be found, if anywhere. Lucky for me I came upon you, for now you won't trouble Jack Friel and his pals any more!"

The inky blackness of the place prevented Ralph from seeing his enemy's face, but he well knew that it was inflamed with passion, and he nerved himself for a bitter struggle, knowing well that the outlaw was determined to have his life, and resolving to sell it dearly.

Deeper and deeper they plunged into the Stygian recesses of the place, and now poor Ralph felt hope departing, yet with the strength of despair hurled himself upon his foe, and exerting all his strength, lifted the outlaw from his feet and threw him upon the platform, right at the very edge of the steps, himself falling across his opponent's body.

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF THE STRUGGLE—A FRIEND IN NEED—CAUGHT.

"Now, you villain!" cried Ralph, "if you don't surrender I will throw you off. There is no use in struggling, for I've got you fast. Help there, help, I say!"

"Curse you!" hissed the outlaw. "You will not be heard in all this rattle and confusion. Say your prayers quick, for I am going to kill you!"

Then he squirmed about, and partly raising himself, threw Ralph against the hand rail, one foot hanging over the lower step, his body just resting upon the upper one.

Ralph saw that it would be all up with him in a moment if he did not do something, and yet, so thick was the darkness that he could see nothing, and could only guess his position.

Drawing up the overhanging foot, he threw himself forward and clutched wildly at the air with both hands, trusting to blind luck to aid him in this strait.

Chance favored him, his grasp encircling the villain's throat, upon which he fastened his fingers most tenaciously.

The darkness was still most intense, and as none of the employees on the train had been aroused by the noise of the struggle, the two contestants had the affair all to themselves.

Ralph had a good hold, or would have had if the struggle had been upon firm ground, but, owing to the violent swaying of the cars, his grip was presently loosened, and he felt himself forced backwards by the efforts of his desperate foe.

The latter, having released his throat from the boy's grasp, now drew up his knees and plunged forward with all his force.

Ralph felt himself going, but as he swayed to one side, threw out his hand and convulsively clutched the hand-rail.

At the next moment he was nearly wrenched from his place, and then a body rushed by him, the sound of a dull thud seeming to follow, though Ralph was by no means certain of this.

His own position was still a most perilous one, however, as his feet nearly touched the ground, his hips just resting on the edge of the lower step, and his arm growing weaker every instant.

Strengthened by despair, he clutched at the guard rail with his disengaged hand, and fortunately succeeded in grasping it.

Then, with one frantic effort he drew himself up, and fell fainting upon the platform just outside the car door.

When he recovered the train had emerged into the light again.

and the sun was brightly shining, as though nothing had happened to disturb the calm peacefulness of the scene.

Ned had disappeared, but whether he had retired to await another opportunity to carry out his base designs, or been hurled from the swift-moving train and been killed, Ralph could not, of course, determine.

His mind was in a whirl, and he could remember nothing more than the fact that there had been a struggle, and that he had escaped by a hair's breadth.

The train was about stopping, and Ralph, arranging his disordered clothes and putting on his hat, which he found jammed up into a corner, waited a moment and then leaped lightly to the ground on the side opposite of the platform.

The town at which he had stopped was a long distance from Crosstown, where he expected to recover the stolen property; but as nothing could be done, in any probability, until the morning, he determined to stay over night, and then go down and get possession of the packet if possible.

He did not wonder at Clif's advising him to take such a step, merely thinking it odd that he had not himself thought of it.

"Funny that I didn't," he muttered, as he hurried away. "It will make less risk, for if the bundle is dispatched a second time something might happen to it. Yes, I'll collar it at Crosstown, and so switch these rascals off upon the siding."

He had lost his gray wig and whiskers in the encounter with Ned, and his clothes were sadly torn and soiled, but these latter were faults that were easily remedied; as he had money in his pocket, and could buy new garments, though there was some danger of his being recognized if he went into the stores of the town, being so well known all along the line.

He determined to chance it, however, and after making himself look as respectable as he could, stopping by a brook to wash his hands and face and smooth his tangled locks, he entered the town once more and walked into the first clothing store he saw.

He had no difficulty in getting what he wanted, and after purchasing his outfit, asked leave to retire and dress himself, first paying for his things, however.

He did this, because he thought he saw a suspicious look in the tradesman's face, as though the latter suspected that he intended to escape out of a back door or window, without paying for his goods.

The look did not altogether disappear at the sight of the money, but thinking little of this, Ralph went off, and in a few moments returned, looking handsomer than ever and greatly altered in appearance.

As he entered the shop he saw the dealer talking to two new-comers, and heard him say:

"I'll bet a dollar that's the man you are after. If you take him in, remember that I told you, and that I am entitled to my share of the reward."

Ralph flushed, but going straight up to the two men, he said:

"Are you two gentlemen special detectives?"

"No—only town constables."

"Have you a warrant for the arrest of one Ralph Wright, alleged to have been one of the Southeastern Railway robbers?"

"No, we haven't; but we expect it shortly."

"Thank you. Good-morning, gentlemen. I am Ralph Wright, not at your service, however."

"Didn't I tell you so?" said the store-keeper, with a grin. "Don't let him go. You've got a right to detain him on suspicion."

Ralph began to move toward the door, when one of the officers held up his hand and said quietly:

"Hold on, my lad. I don't intend to stop you, for I know you, and am convinced of your innocence. I want to say something to this fellow, though, that you ought to hear."

Ralph paused, and then the officer, turning to the shop-keeper, said, contemptuously:

"You pitiable sneak, aren't you ashamed of yourself? You take this lad's money, and then would betray him. If you thought he was a villain, why didn't you refuse to deal with him, and then, after he was well out of your shop, inform upon him?"

"I can't refuse a customer, you know."

"You might at least treat him decently, then. The lad paid you in advance and gave you a fair price, and in honest money, too, I'll bet my pile. Everybody on the line knows Ralph Wright, and there's not a constable in the county but would sooner throw up his position than serve a warrant against him."

"I am deeply obliged to you for your good opinion, sir," said Ralph, blushing; "but I do not remember to have seen you before."

"Very likely not. I haven't been a constable long. I was at the railway smash-up the other night, and saw how nobly you acted; and I am safe in saying that no boy that could do as you did that night would possibly stoop to commit a crime."

"That's all bosh," said the store-keeper. "You've got your duty to perform, and sentiment is out of the question. I want my reward."

"You'll get it in the next world," retorted the other, "and a mighty hot one it will be, too."

At this Ralph and the other constable laughed, and the first continued:

"This young fellow saved a child of mine from a frightful death during that terrible half hour, and do you think that I shall ever forget it? Never! My boy, there's my hand. I know you are innocent, but I would advise you to leave this place as soon as possible."

Then bending over, and speaking in a tone so low that only Ralph could hear, he said:

"Get into the next county and you are all right. My jurisdiction don't reach that far."

Thanking the kind-hearted fellow for his consideration, Ralph passed out into the street and hurried away, lest the vindictive shop-keeper should put someone upon his track to shadow him until a warrant arrived.

He was soon beyond the limits of the town, and the county as well, as he saw by the guide-posts, and, then, finding a farm-house, he went in and asked for a meal and a place to sleep, as he was pretty well tired out by this time.

When he had dispatched a good dinner, he threw himself upon a comfortable bed, intending to sleep for two or three hours and then go down to Crosstown; but to his surprise, when he did awake, he found that it was morning, and that he had been asleep all night.

There was no help for it, of course, and as he felt greatly refreshed, our hero did not complain, but ate a hearty breakfast, and then took the first train for Crosstown, where he arrived in the middle of the forenoon.

He went at once to the express office where his friend was located, and, finding him disengaged, said:

"Got all that stuff in yet, Harry?"

"Yes, and I was just getting it ready to send down to Bradford. I've made it up in one bundle. Do you want to take it?"

"Yes; what are the charges?"

"Five and a half without the odd cents. What the deuce is it, anyhow?"

"I'll tell you later on. There you are. Got the bundle?"

"Yes, there on the other side of the room on that long table."

Ralph tore open the bundle, and soon convinced himself that the whole of the stolen property had been returned.

Scarcely able to conceal his excitement, he bound the packet up securely, and putting it under his arm, turned to leave the place, when a poster lying upon the table attracted his attention.

"What's this, Harry?" he asked. "Can I have it?"

"Yes, there are two of them. I haven't stuck 'em yet. One will do."

"All right. I must go now. I've been a lucky fellow to-day, and sometime I'll tell you all about it."

He little thought that he had been betrayed, and by one whom he would never have suspected, and that at that moment his enemies were already on his track.

He could not tell that the advice to go to Crosstown for the packet was only a part of the plot against him, and that Jack Friel had already been made acquainted with his probable movements.

Such was the case, however, and Friel at that moment had in his possession a letter which told him just how he could get word, not only of the precious packet, but of Ralph as well.

Friel, upon receipt of this, had hurried down to Crosstown, which he reached just behind Ralph, so at this moment he was right outside the express office, concealed behind his light wagon, awaiting Ralph's appearance.

As the lad came out, utterly unsuspecting of evil, his heart light and his pulse beating joyously, two men suddenly sprang upon him, the packet was torn from his grasp, and he himself thrown into the cart, gagged and blindfolded.

In a moment the two men had jumped in, and were rattling down the road at a fearful pace, while, helpless in the bottom of the cart lay poor Ralph, once more a prisoner in the hands of Jack Friel, the outlaw.

CHAPTER XVI.

MOTHER MEG'S INTERFERENCE.

"Now, my friend, I've got you once more, and this time I intend to keep hold of you. The plunder is all right, too."

"I am glad you think so, Mr. Friel. There may be two opinions about that, however."

The speakers were Friel and Ralph, and the place a room in a house at some distance from Crosstown, whither the outlaw had taken the lad.

"What do you mean by that?" asked the outlaw, in reply to Ralph's remark about there being two opinions respecting the stolen property.

"I mean that it will do you no good to have it. It is not worth any more than the price of old paper now!"

Friel turned pale, and his fingers moved nervously, as though he were trying to clutch something out of his reach.

"The roads haven't compromised yet," he gasped. "They can't do that until Tuesday, and there's a couple of days left yet."

"No, they haven't settled yet, or at least the new regulations are not yet in force; but for all that, your plunder will be of no use to you."

"What do you mean? You can't frighten me by riddles, so spit it out, if you've anything to say."

"Read that poster and tell me what you think of it."

So saying, Ralph handed the man the bill he had picked up in the express office, watching him carefully as he read it.

The bill was the notice, issued by Mr. Merritt at Ralph's suggestion, offering a reward for the stolen tickets, and warning any one from attempting to negotiate them.

It went on further to state that new tickets had been issued, and that none of the old ones would be taken unless officially stamped, and that any person presenting any ticket which there was reason to believe had been stolen would be liable to arrest.

"Confound it!" muttered Friel. "Whose notion was this?"

"Mine. How do you like it?"

"But you are proscribed. You daren't show your face to Merritt or any of the railway officials."

"There you are wrong, for I have seen Merritt, and it was at my suggestion that this step was taken."

"You are a smart lad, but I'll outwit you for all that," laughed Friel. "I'll have every bit of this stuff sold and scattered broadcast before to-night. Your precious poster is not circulated yet."

There was a window, securely bolted, in the room, and while Friel had been speaking, Ralph had walked over towards it and looked out.

"Don't fancy you can get out that way," remarked the outlaw, with a leer. "There's a high wall all around, and the top is covered with broken glass, set into solid cement."

"I wasn't thinking about that. Come here, my friend; your eyes are good. Do you see a poster upon that dead wall opposite? I think you can read it at this distance."

Friel was at the window in an instant, his face aflame, and his fingers twitching convulsively.

His eyes were good, as Ralph had said, and he had no trouble in making out the principal lines in the poster Ralph had shown him.

It was the exact counterpart of that which he now held in his hand, the one taken from the Crosstown express office by Ralph.

"I fancy we have come a considerable distance," said our hero, coolly. "This poster was in Crosstown when I left, and here you see is a copy stuck up, upon my arrival. I think it must have been pretty generally circulated by this time."

Friel said nothing for a moment, but then he broke out into a torrent of wrath, his face being livid, his eyes glistening with rage, and every sense wrought to the highest pitch of excitement.

"The fiends take you!" he screamed. "You have upset all my plans by your infernal honesty. I would have divided with you, and now you've knocked the whole thing in the head. Curse you for a meddling, hypocritical sneak. You've done nothing but try to spoil my game ever since I first saw you. Was it for this I got you out of the jail? Hang you, I'll make you suffer for this!"

He went on at some length cursing like a pirate, and giving free rein to his passions, until at length Ralph put one hand on his arm and said quietly:

"Save your breath to cool your soup, Jack. You can't fool me; I know well enough that you never intended to divvy with me, or with the misguided fellow who first put it in your way to possess this plunder! You might make him believe it, but I know what your feelings toward me are, well enough."

"Yes, you snivelling, meddling, canting, hypocritical hound, you do understand them; but you don't understand the means I am going to take. Do you know that you are in my power?"

"For the present, yes."

"And that I have sworn to kill you?"

"You have tried it often enough for me to understand that."

"But you don't know how I am going to do it?"

"In some diabolical fashion, I do not doubt. Are you the arch fiend himself that you delight in these cruelties?"

"You'll think I'm a good deal worse when you see what I am going to do with you."

"I think so now, for Satan was once an angel in Heaven, while you have been a fiend from the very start."

"Ho, ho, you compliment me. I'd rather be that than one of your milk-and-water sort. There's no nonsense about me, I can tell you."

Although Ralph was unfettered and alone with the outlaw, he knew that there was no use to attempt an escape now, for not only was Friel armed to the teeth, but provided also with ample means of reducing the lad to subjection, should he make any rash attempts to regain his freedom.

Just outside the half-open door were two men, rendering escape in that direction impossible.

The window, too, was too small to admit of one's body passing through it, and the house was so isolated that it would have been useless to think of attracting any outsider's attention by calling out.

Although he knew that there was no help for him, Ralph was not at all downcast, for he knew he could die but once, and if it were his lot to be called away now, there would be no use in trying to evade the divine edict.

It was hard to die so young, and while his life was so full of promise, but then he knew that he had always tried to do his duty, and that was a great comfort.

He had outwitted the villains, do what they might, and he felt so sure that his death would be avenged that he was nerved to endure whatever might be in store for him.

He was well aware that Friel would tax his devilish ingenuity to the utmost to provide a torture more terrible than anything he had ever yet thought of, and yet the prospect did not unnerve him, for he had resolved to endure stoically every punishment to which he might be subjected, and bid defiance to the wretch who inflicted them.

To Friel his calmness was most irritating, for the scoundrel expected to see him beg for mercy, resolving that he should do so, and that his proud spirit should be broken, no matter at what cost, for human life was nothing to him, and the more he could torture his victims the better pleased he was.

He surveyed Ralph a moment in silence, and then said, fiercely:

"We shall see what you are made of presently, you young viper. Hallo there, Joe, Ned; come in."

At the summons the two men outside entered, and Ralph was sur-

prised to see his old enemy, Ned—badly used up, to be sure—but the same Ned for all that.

His forehead was badly cut, and one eye was covered with a green shade, his cheeks and nose being a mass of plaster strips, crossing each other in every direction, while his hands showed many bruises and cuts, and a bad limp in one leg showed how general his hurts had been.

The only wonder to Ralph was that the man was alive at all, after having been thrown from the cars, as he presumed the fellow had been.

"I'm a nice looking fellow, ain't I?" said Ned, with an oath. "It was lucky I fell into a hole between the tracks, or I'd've been run over the next minute by a train going opposite to ours. You young viper, you'd've liked to kill me, I believe."

"It certainly wasn't my fault if I didn't," answered Ralph, saucily, "but you haven't any one to blame but yourself. Perhaps you'll let me alone after this."

"But we won't, you know," said Friel. "Seize him, lads."

The two villains sprang upon Ralph, who planted one fist in Joe's eye, and knocked two teeth down Ned's throat with the other.

He seemed to have suddenly acquired the strength of a giant, and it took all three of the villains to hold him, his struggles being most violent.

His coat was torn from his back, and his shirt sleeves ripped from wrist to shoulder, exposing his arms and neck, strong, sinewy and muscular, the cords standing out in bold relief, the veins swelling nigh to bursting, and the muscles strained to their utmost.

Sheer force of numbers was the only thing that could subdue the lad, and after a protracted struggle, during which he had given his tormentors several stunning blows, the marks of which they would bear for a considerable time, he was thrown upon a bench and securely pinioned.

"Now for the iron!" shouted Friel, and at the words Ned disappeared from the room, while Joe laughed hysterically and said:

"Put your private mark upon him, Jack, so that you will know him again when you meet him in perdition."

Ralph shuddered, for he had gathered enough from what had just been said to know that a fearful torture was awaiting him, and as he struggled hopelessly to burst his bonds, the old woman called Mother Meg came into the place in a state of great excitement.

"Ho, ho, you have got him again," she screamed. "Give it to him well this time. Burn his eyes out and roast his heart before his very nose!"

As she uttered these terrible words she suddenly caught sight of Ralph's bared arms and shoulders, and throwing herself at the foot of the bench to which he was secured, fairly screamed:

"Release him! You shall not harm a hair of his head! Release him, I say, or I will give you the torture intended for him!"

"Are you mad, mother?" asked Friel, in a passion. "Release him, indeed! Never!"

"But I say you shall! Do you see this?"

As she spoke she pointed to a peculiar discoloration of an odd shape, somewhat resembling a wheel, upon Ralph's left arm, halfway between the elbow and shoulder.

It was evidently a birth-mark, the smoothness of the skin and the peculiar coloring, a dull brown, precluding the possibility of its having been produced by artificial means, and indeed it had always been there, the boy having been born with it.

"Do you see that?" repeated the woman again. "I know this lad now, and you shall not touch him or harm a finger of him. My God, had I known this before, the poor fellow might have been spared much misery."

"Nonsense," laughed Friel, "that is nothing but an old scar."

"It is not; it is a body mark, and I know it well. There is not another such; and now that I look at him, I know the lad again, though he is changed since I last saw him, many years ago."

"Stand aside," said Friel, harshly, as Ned entered, bearing a red-hot iron in his hand. "This is but the folly of a mad old woman."

He was about to take the iron from Ned when Meg leaped to her feet, and, seizing the glowing bar of metal, brandished it around her head, and striding in front of the intended victim, shrieked hoarsely:

"Back, on your lives, for the first man that advances will get a mark that shall last him all his miserable life! Back, I say, for I will not be gainsaid. The man that dares dispute me shall be branded like Cain, the pattern for all murderers! What! You will have it? Then be the fruit of your folly upon your own head!"

Jack Friel, her own son, braving the woman's fury, had leaped forward, knife in hand, to make short work of poor Ralph and complete his unholy task at a blow, when the woman, like a tigress enraged, gave one sweeping blow and struck him full across the forehead with the glowing iron.

A sickening smoke and stench arose, and with a blood-curdling cry, Friel fell to the floor, the knife falling from his palsied grasp.

With an answering cry of horror, wrung from her at the thought of what she had done, the woman let fall the hissing iron and fled from the spot where such a fearful scene had just been enacted.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRANGE RESCUE—WHAT RALPH LEARNED.

OVERCOME by his emotions, Ralph had fainted when the enraged woman had struck her own son over the face with the seething iron, and it was some moments before he recovered himself.

He was still bound to the bench, and evidently alone, for he could neither see nor hear any one in the room with him.

He tried to break the cords that bound him, for his senses suddenly told him that he was in great peril of his life.

The room was full of smoke, which he both saw and smelt, and now the sense of hearing brought the sound of crackling flames to his ears, while the increased heat of the room was quickly felt.

He could not get up, but he could turn his head, and a sudden glance revealed the cause of his fright.

The hot iron had set fire to the floor, and the flames were already spreading with great rapidity, the draught from the open door fanning them into new life at each succeeding moment.

"My God!" groaned the poor boy in his agony, "I shall be burned alive! Is there no help at hand?"

The sound of his voice suddenly produced another and similar sound, for as he ceased he heard a noise near him, and then a voice said:

"Oho! you want help, do you? I'll help you into another world, that's what I'll do."

The voice was Friel's, and, turning his head, Ralph saw the man just getting upon his feet.

A horrible red mark, from which the blood slowly trickled, extended right across his forehead, his matted locks, scorched and burned in places, hanging down over his eyes, which glittered like a wild beast's.

It was a terrible sight, and Ralph turned away to shut it out, Friel laughing like a fiend as he said:

"Ay, curse you, I am not pleasant to look at, I know. I am branded like a felon, and all upon your account. My blood boils like molten iron, my brain fairly bubbles, and there is a pain all through me which threatens to drive me mad. Where is my knife? I can scarcely see. My God, what is this? Fiends and furies, the house is afire."

He had just discovered this, his first thought on being aroused by the sound of Ralph's voice being how he could further vent his spite upon the hapless youth.

Now, however, the instinct of self-preservation was stronger than his hate, and realizing that the lad must perish, at all events, if left there, he gave vent to a hoarse laugh and quickly fled from the room, which had by this time become a most dangerous place in which to remain.

"Help!" shouted Ralph, struggling to release himself, but no help came, and the flames gathered thick and fast around him, and threatened to soon cut off his retreat.

If he was denied human aid, there was other help near, for the flames in their course severed the cords which bound his feet, and in an instant he had risen and stood gazing about him, trying to find an avenue of escape.

His eyes lighted upon Friel's knife, lying upon the floor, and in an instant he was kneeling upon the burning boards with his head bent forward.

To seize the knife in his teeth was but the work of an instant, and another to cut the cords about his arms and wrists.

He was free at last, but still in deadly peril, for the room was now one mass of flame and smoke, and through the open door he could see that the fire had already extended to other parts of the house.

If he would save himself he must hasten or it will be too late, and realizing this, he seized his coat, and throwing it over his head grasped the knife firmly in one hand, and made a dash for the outer hall, where he might possibly still find a loop-hole of escape.

As he reached the hallway he suddenly heard a shrill scream, and looking up, he saw a young girl standing at the head of a flight of stairs waving her hands despairingly, her whole attitude being one of terror.

One glance was sufficient to show Ralph that the young girl was the one he had saved from the wreck, and who had afterwards rescued him from death.

It was Jennie Everett herself, and doubtless Friel had kept her a prisoner in the house, and now in his haste had forgotten her and left her to her fate.

"Save me, if you be human!" she cried, casting an imploring look at Ralph.

The will was not wanting, but the means were scant, and many would have shuddered at the task.

The stairs were burned away for more than half the distance, and to ascend would be a most perilous undertaking.

That accomplished even, the descent would be more perilous still, with the form of the poor girl in his arms and the flames roaring all around him.

For an instant Ralph comprehended the situation, and then, in a ringing voice, heard above the noise and confusion, shouted:

"Jump! It is the only chance for escape."

"I dare not."

"Fear nothing. I am here to receive you. Jump, on your life!" There was no time for idle lamenting, for the flames were pressing hard upon the poor girl, and even Ralph's position was growing more untenable every instant.

Gathering her skirts about her, the poor girl made the leap, and alighted safely in Ralph's arms, while he, without losing a moment, hurried towards the stairs leading to the street.

He had taken but one step down, when a door at the bottom was suddenly thrown open and a thick cloud of smoke and flame rushed up, putting an effectual stop to his progress.

"Heaven help us!" he cried in anguish. "The villain has fired the house below to prevent our escape!"

At this instant a small door close by, which he had not before observed, was opened, and the old woman, Mother Meg, appeared.

Seizing Ralph by the arm, she dragged him with his small burden into a small closet and closed the door behind her.

"This is a way seldom used," she said, "and by it we may escape. It leads to the cellar. Follow me and say not a word."

As she still retained her hold upon Ralph, he could not but obey, and presently he felt himself descending a flight of stone steps, the passage being dark and chill, as though it were already underground.

The way was not long, though there were many turnings, and more than once the hag cautioned him about the steps he should take lest he might fall.

At last she paused, and pushing the young man upon a stone bench, closed a heavy door with a slam, the noise of a rusty key turning in the lock being heard immediately afterwards.

"She has gone and left us," said the lad, "and who knows but what the danger here is as great as that above."

"Peace!" answered the woman. "I have not gone. I mean to save, not abandon you. Wait a moment till I procure a light."

Ralph put the young lady upon the seat beside him, chafing her hands to restore her to consciousness, she having swooned after her rescue.

Hardly had he accomplished this when the place was dimly lighted by a candle, which the old woman placed in a cranny of the wall and then said:

"Here you are safe, but it will be necessary to remain until the fire is out."

"But the flooring overhead will fall in and crush us."

"No, it is of brick."

"But the door?"

"Is lined on this side with sheet-iron."

"What sort of a place is this, then?"

"It has been a prison for Jack Friel's victims, but now it is a place of refuge."

"How do I know that you are to be trusted? Remember, I am armed now, and at the first sign of treachery I will kill you."

"Peace, hot-headed boy!" answered the strange creature. "Did I not tell you I had come to save you? Would I have struck my own son as I did if I were your enemy? Though I may have forgotten you for an instant in my terror, do not think that I intended you to perish."

"How comes this sudden interest in my behalf?" asked Ralph. "When I first saw you you were not so eager to save me from your precious son."

"I did not know you then."

"You knew I was Railroad Ralph."

"True, but it was not by that title that I first knew you."

"What do you mean? I never saw you before that day."

"Not to remember me, perhaps."

"What do you mean by that? Do you know me?"

"Yes, better than you think. I was present when you were born, and saw you many times when you were a baby. Your mother did me many a kindness when others would have injured me. But for her my life would have been worse than it was, for while she lived I could not commit wrong. Had she not died, I might still be an honest woman, and my son might not be a criminal."

"But tell me who were you. I do not remember you."

"I was the nurse. You were a pretty boy, though I used to say that the strange birthmark on your arm spoiled your good looks. But for that I would never have known you again, for it is fifteen years since I saw you, and you have grown handsomer than I thought you would be. Besides, you lived far away in the East then, and how should I know you had come West?"

"That was after my mother had been dead three years."

"And I had already come here, my poor son being crazy for a roving life. He was too much for me after your mother died. She used to restrain him, but I could not. Ah! times have changed since then."

"What did you say about my being known to you under a different name?"

"Your mother's name was not Wright when you were born. She married again shortly before her death, her husband being named Wright. He gave you his own name when she died, and but few persons knew that you were not his son."

"I did not know it myself."

"And probably not more than one or two know it now."

"And my real name is—"

"Ralph Shepton."

"Why, that is my mother's maiden name!" cried Jennie, who had listened in silence to these revelations.

"Had she a brother Ralph?" asked old Meg.

"Surely, but he has been dead many years."

"He was the father of this young man, but died just before his son was born."

"Why, then we are cousins," cried Jennie, joyfully. "I am glad of that, for now I like you better than ever. How strange it all seems."

"Is your name Everett?" asked Meg.

"Yes."

"Then it is right, for Ralph Shepton's only sister married a gentleman by that name. Your mother is dead?"

"Yes."

"And your father is one of the wealthiest men in this part of the country?"

"I believe so; why do you ask?"

"Oh, for no reason," answered the woman, evasively. "I heard

so, that is all. There are no conditions upon which you may inherit your mother's property, are there? It was hers, for Everett had nothing when he married your mother."

"I know nothing about it, and don't care."

"Oh, well, it's only an old woman's curiosity, after all. I dare say you'll get a pretty penny some day."

Then she withdrew a short distance, leaving the two lovers, for such they had now become, through their mutual dangers, alone with each other.

They had hardly exchanged a dozen words, however, when there came a sudden crash, a terrible rumbling was heard above them, and the ceiling began to give way in many places.

Ralph sprang to his feet to ascertain the cause of the disturbance, when the door was thrown open, and Jack Friel's accomplice appeared in evident haste.

A gleam of light illuminated the place, and for an instant Ralph was blinded by it.

Then a shower of bricks fell at his feet, and springing aside, he looked around for his companion.

She had disappeared, and with her the old woman who had made such strange revelations.

At the next instant the door was closed again, and Ralph was alone in profound darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ACCIDENTS AND INCIDENTS.

"AFTER all, the old hag has played me false," cried Ralph, in vexation. "I do not believe a word of this yarn she has told. I must get out of this place, at all events, for it is not as safe as she would have me believe."

So saying, he made his way towards where there seemed to be a gleam of light, which he thought might possibly be an exit.

He had taken half a dozen steps only when a large portion of the ceiling just over where he had been standing fell in, together with a mass of glowing timbers.

He pushed ahead, caring little in what direction he went so long as he escaped the present danger, and, in a few minutes, he found that he was in a narrow passage, barely four feet in width, and scarcely high enough to admit of his walking upright.

He turned once to see if he was followed, when he saw that the entrance had been choked by the blazing timbers, and that he must of necessity continue as he had begun.

The passage extended for some distance, and then abruptly stopped, there being evidently no other means of entrance besides the one by which he had come into it.

There seemed to be no door, although by kicking against the wall he produced a hollow sound, which assured him that there was something beyond—possibly another cellar, the means of communicating with which had been done away with.

"This is a pretty state of things," he muttered. "I'm switched off most effectually. I can't go forward or back, but am stuck here like a rat in a trap. Well, I'll wait till the fire burns out, and then, perhaps, I can get out the same way I came in."

He then sat down upon the ground, and patiently waited, and while doing so fell into a dose, which probably lasted a couple of hours.

He was awakened by the sound of voices near him, but, although the place was lighter than when he entered it, he could see no one.

He listened a moment, and then discovered that the men to whom the voices belonged were at work on the other side of the wall.

He discovered, also, what he had not noticed before—that there was an opening in the wall near the top and that through this came rays of light which fell along the sidewalks and made quite a little illumination.

The young fellow was about to call out to the men to come to his help, when something that one of them said changed his purpose, and caused him to very wisely hold his peace.

"We'll loosen this rail," said the man, "and when the train comes along, over she goes."

"But there's no chance of getting any plunder."

"I know that, but we'll have our revenge. Old Merritt will be aboard, and we'll pay him up for cheating us out of our honest earnings."

"So we will. Do you know where Jack is?"

"No. He got away when the house burned up, but he lost that bundle."

"What, the one with the tickets that we got from young Ralph?"

"Yes, it was destroyed in the fire."

"And the house is all down?"

"Pretty much. It ain't far from this tunnel you know. Give me a hand with the crow now; the train is due here in a few minutes, and we must get out of this before it comes. We can take the same road that brought us here."

Ralph realized the situation at once, and his very soul was filled with horror, as he thought of the nature of the work the men were performing.

He knew one of them to be a member of Friel's gang, and he did not doubt that the other was as well.

He knew where he was now, for he had often been through this tunnel, and had noticed openings in the wall at different points, though he had not supposed that they connected with the cellars of houses.

How the two men had eluded the guard at the tunnel entrance and got in, he did not care; he only knew that they were there for an unlawful purpose, and determined to prevent its accomplishment.

It mattered not if Mr. Merritt were aboard the train which was to be wrecked, there were others aboard as well, and their lives were as precious as the superintendent's.

It mattered not that the man had doubted him; that was no reason why he should be killed, and Ralph resolved that he should not.

How to get at the men and prevent them from accomplishing their dastardly deed was the question nearest his heart, and the answer came in a moment.

He could bear the villains at work—hear the distant rumble of the train, and with the strength of desperation, he threw himself against the wall, crying out:

"Stop, you villains—stop!"

The wall was by no means stout in the first place, and had been weakened already by the falling of the ruined house, so that when Ralph threw his weight upon it, away it went, and in an instant he was precipitated right in the midst of the villains.

Surprised and frightened at the sudden apparition, they fled, dropping their lanterns, which were extinguished, leaving the place in deep darkness.

They had also left their tools behind them, and these Ralph found after a few moments' groping.

The rumbling of the train increased, and presently the light from the engine flashed along the track.

Ralph gave one quick glance, and saw that the rail on one side had been partly wrenches from its place, sufficient to cause an accident.

Seizing the bar, he threw the bent rail into position, and bracing himself for the struggle, held it firmly in place.

There was no time to signal the train, which was close upon him, but, provided he did not flinch, an accident might be averted; and he determined to take the risk.

His strength might not prove sufficient, but there was a chance of saving the train, and he meant to throw all the influence upon that chance that lay in his power.

On came the train, and holding himself as firmly as though made of steel, he stood bravely to his task.

With a shriek and a roar the iron horse leaped upon the injured rail, and Ralph felt the strain, but never let go for an instant.

It was all over in half a minute, and the whole train passed in safety, but to Ralph it seemed an age.

He drew a deep sigh when the last car whirled by, and then, letting the bar fall from his grasp, he sank half fainting upon the track.

Fearing that the two wretches might return, and fearing also to walk through the tunnel lest his presence there might be misunderstood by the guards, he made his way into the passage whence he had broken in upon the villains, and walked to the end, hoping that there might now be a chance of getting out.

He found that the beams which had fallen down might be easily removed, provided he had any suitable tool, and he returned to the tunnel for the bar which he had forgotten in his excitement.

Half an hour's work was sufficient to secure him an entrance into the main cellar, but this he found partly choked up, the door being effectually shut against him by the rubbish which had fallen against it.

He was about to give utterance to an exclamation of vexation, when he heard the voices of men working outside, one man saying to his fellows:

"I wonder if there are any more bodies inside. We haven't found Jack Friel's yet."

Men were at work then searching for the bodies of probable victims, and at the thought of being saved, poor Ralph nearly swooned.

"Hallo, hallo!" he shouted. "Get to work there and help a fellow out."

There was an answering shout, and then the sound of axes and picks, and Ralph knew that at last he was safe.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

"Cut away, boys! I have been in here long enough!"

"Be patient old fellow, and we'll soon have you out."

"Now, then, haul away on that timber. Steady there! Here you, Tom Davis and Pete French, cut off that bit of stick and give the others a chance."

"How long is it going to take you, lads? The air in here is stifling."

"Not long, Ralph. Look sharp and you'll see us in a moment."

Thus messages were given back and forth by Ralph, imprisoned in the cellar, and the men who had come to his release, the lad being cheered by the assurances of speedy deliverance, and the men working harder from knowing how much Ralph desired to get out.

An hour's hard work sufficed to free him, and at last he stepped out and saw that it was almost sunset, considerably more time having elapsed since his first entrance to the house than he had thought there had.

As he advanced to shake by the hand the foreman of the gang of workmen, a loud laugh greeted him, and one man said:

"Hallo, blackie, what did you come out for? We were looking for Railroad Ralph."

"Perhaps he's inside," said another. "Get away, Mr. Nig, and give him a chance to get out!"

"What do you mean?" said Ralph in great astonishment. "I'm Railroad Ralph myself. Guess you're on the wrong line when you call me a darky."

"Well, your voice is white enough, that's certain," said the foreman, "but the rest of you is as black as ink!"

Ralph gave a quick glance at his hands and arms, the latter being bare to the shoulder, as will be remembered, and then joined heartily in the laugh that then broke out afresh.

He was indeed as black as a coal, probably from the smoke and the soot which had sifted in upon him without his knowledge during his imprisonment in the cellar.

Not only were his hands and arms black, but his shirt also—what remained of it—and his clothes, every movement causing the soot to fall off in flakes.

"Well, I don't wonder you laugh," he said, good-naturedly. "Is my face as black as the rest of me?"

"It has a decidedly sunburned appearance," replied Tom Davis, with a broad grin.

"You'd pass for a nigger in broad daylight," added Pete French, "and charcoal would make you look white."

"Never mind his black face," spoke up the foreman. "His heart is white enough, and that we all know."

"You're right. Three cheers for Railroad Ralph, the boss of the road!"

A tremendous shout went up from every throat, which was repeated again and again, Ralph standing there blushing the while, though no one could see his heightened color under the soot, and when the demonstration had ceased he bowed his acknowledgments, and said, pleasantly:

"Thank you, boys, but as I don't fancy going around with a black face, just let one of you give me a pail of water and some soap, not forgetting a good, coarse towel, and you'll soon have Railroad Ralph back again."

"And what'll become of the darky?"

"Oh, he'll be drowned in the water bucket," answered Ralph, with a laugh, and then turning to the foreman, he said, in a low tone:

"Seen anything of Jack Friel or an old woman?"

"Not a thing. Two men were found in the tunnel, run over by a train, and it was thought they had got there while escaping from the burning house, through the cellar."

"Did one of 'em have a big, red beard?"

"Yes."

"Then they have met with a just fate. I do not think they got in through the cellar, or at least not this one. Some other probably. They were going to wreck a train, and very near succeeded."

"Why, to be sure, they found a rail partly broken, and they wondered how it was that the train didn't run off."

"Because I was up to time, that is the reason," and in a few words Ralph told him what had happened.

"Well, I never did," said the man, wonderingly.

"You are a trump, and no mistake. Ah, here comes Tom with the water. Now, then, dive in, and drown the nigger."

This was soon done, and then, darkness beginning to come on, Ralph borrowed a coat and hat from one of the men, and started off up the street, there being little chance of his being recognized at night.

He soon discovered that he had been taken to a town at a considerable distance from Crosstown, and not many miles from the place where he had jumped from his engine, as it plunged over into Swift river.

He knew that there would be no train towards Brandford for several hours, so that there would be no time for a rest before going home, as he had determined upon doing.

It had grown quite dark, and he was passing a hotel rather hurriedly, the glare of light from the doorway being rather too strong for him, when someone walked hurriedly out and joined him, saying nothing until they got into the dark again, when he spoke up and said:

"What's the matter, Ralph? You seem to be in a hurry."

"Hallo, Clif! What brought you here? I thought you had gone home."

"Oh, no; I decided not to do so just yet. How did you get on at Crosstown?"

"H'm! It was on your advice that I went there. I very nearly kicked the bucket in consequence."

"You don't blame me for that, I hope, old fellow? You were not bound to go, you know. You thought it would be a good plan, yourself."

"So I did, and so it was, although I had a narrow escape from bursting my boiler and going to everlasting smash."

"I am sorry you got into trouble. But, I say, come and have something to eat, and tell me all about it."

"I am agreeable."

"There's a good place just beyond, where we won't be disturbed; and over a jolly good chop and potatoes, to say nothing of some first-class coffee and hot rolls, we can enjoy ourselves like lords, with no one to bother us."

Ralph approved of this plan, and while the viands were being prepared, he told Clif of his adventures since their last meeting.

"I have found my young lady and lost her again," he said in conclusion. "I must find her at once, or at least communicate with her father."

"What did you say her name was?" asked Clif.

"Jennie Everett. You know it as well as I do, for you know her father, and remarked upon that circumstance after I saved her from the railway smash."

"So I did," answered Clif, strangely moved, though Ralph did not notice his agitation. "And you love her?"

"Devotedly."

"Does she return your love?"

"I have every reason to believe so."

"Ah!"

That was all Clif said; but if his thoughts had been known to Ralph, the latter would have been somewhat surprised, to say the least.

"I must find and rescue her from these villains," continued Ralph, after a pause, but at this moment the waiter entered with the supper, and nothing was said until he had withdrawn.

"I will help you do that," remarked Clif, after having dispatched half of his chop.

"Do what?"

"Rescue Miss Jennie from her abductors."

"Oh, yes, to be sure. It is very kind of you, Clif, but somehow, I'd rather do that job myself."

"Why, you are not afraid of her falling in love with me, are you?"

"Oh, no," replied Ralph, with a laugh, "but for all that, I'd a little rather do the job myself."

"But if you should need me?"

"I will call on you. By the way, are you going back to the office? They do not suspect you, do they?"

"Not in the least, but I shan't go back until my holiday is out, which won't be for a week yet. If I did go there, they might ask if I had seen you, and I should hate to give you away."

Ralph looked at the speaker, for there was a tone in his voice that he did not like, but, trusting his companion, he dismissed the suspicious thoughts that arose, and with a light laugh, said:

"That's a good fellow, Clif. By Jove! What's that?"

Well might he start and spring from his seat, for pressed against the window-pane in front of him, and hidden from Clif, he had seen a ghastly face, and a finger raised in warning against his friend.

The face was that of the old woman, Mother Meg, and her meaning was as plain as though she had spoken in thunder tones.

Her long, bony finger had been shaken at Clif in a manner that indicated caution, while her eyes enforced the lesson she would teach by that silent motion.

The face was gone in a moment, and when Clif arose and looked about him, nothing was to be seen but the darkness.

"What's the matter, Ralph?" he asked.

"Nothing. I thought I saw someone outside watching me. Draw down the curtain. We can't have any spies around."

While Clif was thus engaged, Ralph heard a sharp hiss, and turning swiftly around, he beheld the queer old woman standing in the half-open doorway.

She pointed her lean finger at Clif, shook her head, and formed with her haggard lips the words, plainly as though spoken:

"Beware of him, for he is your enemy!"

Then she was gone, and when Clif resumed his seat, there was nothing to tell of the presence of the mysterious old woman and her strange warning.

CHAPTER XX.

LIGHT UPON DARK PLACES.

"I THINK I'd better be going," said Ralph, after a pause. "I want to catch my train."

"Why, there isn't one for two hours yet. You've lots of time."

"Well, I don't care to stay here any longer. I am afraid."

"You afraid? Nonsense. I never heard of such a thing. You can't make me believe that Railroad Ralph is afraid of anything. I know better than that."

"I am afraid of losing my train, I mean."

"Nonsense, you've lots of time—oceans of it, man."

"Suppose we go out, anyhow. It's close in here."

"All right, if you'll just wait till I pay the bill at the counter."

"I'll wait outside," and without further ado he left the room, passed through a hallway, and emerged into the street.

Hardly had his foot touched the pavement when his arm was seized by someone and a voice whispered in his ear: "Follow me."

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

"You are the woman who saved me from Jack Friel's cruel hands?"

"Yes."

"What do you want of me?"

"To bring you to the young lady."

"She is safe?"

"Yes. I took her to a place of safety, though I was prevented from giving you warning, and could not return again."

"Lead on, woman, I will follow. Stop; there is my friend inside."

"He is not your friend. Beware of him, for he will do you a mischief yet."

"No, no. I will not, cannot believe it."

"Foolish boy, you only imperil yourself by trusting him. Haste, if you would see her whom you love better than anything in the world."

Thus urged Ralph needed no further incentive, and he quickly followed the strange woman through the dark streets, forgetting Clif entirely in his excitement.

At the end of ten minutes the woman paused in front of a house, the door of which she thrust open, and then, drawing Ralph after her, entered, closing the door behind her.

Ralph drew himself up, not entirely unsuspecting of foul play; but, with an exclamation of impatience, the woman quickly strode forward a few paces and opened a second door, admitting a flood of light into the passage.

There was a well-lighted room beyond, and here, seated upon a low

couch, was Jennie Everett, looking more beautiful than Ralph had ever seen her.

With a wild cry of recognition the young man sprang forward, and in a moment the two young people were clasped in each other's arms.

"Thank Heaven, you are safe!" said Ralph, when he could master his emotions sufficiently to speak. "We will never more be separated."

"And you will take me home to my father?"

"Yes, this very night."

"Then let us depart at once."

"There is no train until midnight, but in the meantime I will telegraph to your father to meet us."

"Oh, I shall be so glad, for I know that he is dying with anxiety to know what has become of me."

"We will go away at once."

They lost no time in leaving the place, and hurried at once to the depot, where they would wait for the train, and where Ralph intended to telegraph both to Mr. Everett and Mr. Merritt.

As they hurried along the street, Ralph did not notice a muffled figure following them and listening to their every word, or he might have been more cautious.

So engrossed were they both, however, that they saw nothing, heard nothing, and thus unwittingly placed themselves in the power of a designing rogue.

This was no less a person than Clifford Wayne, of whose character the old woman had formed a correct opinion, both from instinct and from observation.

"So, so, I shall be outwitted yet if I am not careful," muttered the young fellow, as he allowed the two to pursue their way unmolested, having heard all he wanted.

"She shall never be his," he muttered, as he watched them out of sight. "The fortune is too nearly within my grasp for me to let it slip. By Heaven, if she cannot be mine, she shall never be his! She shall die first, and then the money comes to me!"

What could those terrible words mean, and what secret had the false friend gained possession of, that he should be so bitter against both the young people?

In brief, the secret of his malignancy was this:

While rifling the safe of the railway company, he had come upon papers which told him many important things.

Among these was the copy of a will which interested Jennie Everett very nearly.

From this he learned that if the young lady died without children or did not marry before she came of age, the whole of her property would be divided between her father and himself.

He had not told Ralph that he was very closely connected with the family of the young girl, although he had hinted at a relationship; but such was the case, and these papers proved conclusively to him that if he could himself marry his cousin, or prevent her marrying any one else before she became of age, the fortune would be his.

He had all along played against Ralph, and, therefore, it would be no difficult task to keep up the same game.

His pretended repentance and remorse was all a sham, meant to blind the young man, as it did; for Ralph, being so honest and right-minded himself, could not believe Clif to be as base as he was, although he admitted to himself, reluctantly, that his former friend was rather wild.

It was Clif who had informed Friel of Ralph's intention to go to Crosstown for the express package, after having himself advised the young man to do so.

It was he, also, that had set on foot the damaging rumors against Ralph's character, and it had been with the aid of Friel himself that he had secured Ralph's escape from prison.

His motive in doing all this is easily explained.

Being bad and evil-hearted himself, he could trust no one else; and he resolved that, in order to prevent Ralph from making known his complicity in the robbery, he would so implicate Ralph himself that the latter would be bound to silence.

Jack Friel, wily and cunning, had quickly perceived that craft would accomplish more than force in getting the young scamp upon his side, and at the earliest opportunity, therefore, he professed himself to be Clif's friend, flattered and cajoled him, made him a present of considerable money, all the more acceptable on account of the depletion in Clif's purse, and in many other ways best known to the clever scoundrel, contrived to twist the fellow completely around his finger.

Clif had, in the beginning, through accident at first, and then by design, contrived to direct suspicion against Ralph as being the mysterious thief, and with Friel's aid he increased this suspicion to such an extent as to make even Mr. Merritt, Ralph's best friend, doubt him.

Clifford Wayne was heartless, selfish, and thoroughly vicious, and his affection for Ralph was the veriest sham that had ever been foisted upon the unsuspecting.

He had counted upon Ralph's assistance in the first place, and finding the lad incorruptible, had determined to put him in such a position as would make a clear statement of the case impossible and in spite of Ralph's cleverness, he had thoroughly deceived him.

And now, seeing that he was about to lose a fortune through Ralph, and perhaps be exposed likewise, he resolved to get rid of all his enemies at one stroke.

After seeing the two disappear in the distance, he went directly to where he knew he could find Friel, in order to carry out a plot that he had formed.

He found the outlaw, and the two began at once to make up their plans.

The outlaw bore a fearful red scar across his forehead, the wound being only slightly healed, although he had applied soothing bandages to it at once.

"I am a pretty-looking fellow," he said, with an oath, "and it's on account of that precious friend of yours."

"Well, you can get even with him on that score."

"How?"

"He is going out on the midnight train."

"Well?"

"That train must not take him, or if it does—"

Friel filled up the pause by adding:

"It must run off the track or something."

"Yes."

The job is worth something."

"I will pay you well for it, for I am in a position to do so now—will be when he and the girl are out of the way."

"H'm! What have you against her?"

"She stands in my way. I'll get a fortune if she is out of the question."

"H'm! That increases the value of my services," repied Friel, dryly.

"Ask what you choose, in reason, and you shall have it."

"I'll remember that. Now to our plans. Do you know the drawbridge, a mile below here?"

"Yes. It has a double track across it."

"Two trains cross that bridge at midnight—the one that Ralph will take, and the one from Bradford."

"Yes, and—by Jove! old Merritt and the girl's father will come to the latter."

"The girl's father?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"He is going to telegraph for him, and for Merritt as well."

"Then he won't go out until the old man gets here, and my plan is busted."

"Confound it! I didn't think of that."

"You ain't much of a hand to plot, you ain't. Now, do you know what you must do?"

"Well?"

"Get him to take that train."

"But he won't if the old man is coming on the other. He will wait for him."

"Now, don't you be too previous, but listen to me. He must get telegram from the old man, and another from Merritt, saying that the will wait at Bedford Junction."

"How am I going to get it to him?"

"Forgery, my boy. I have done this thing before, and I've got the telegraph blanks. I'll hire a boy to do the delivering."

"Good! You've got a better head for such things than I have."

"H'm! if Ralph was not in the dark concerning you, it wouldn't be so easy to make it work."

"Having got all your enemies at the drawbridge, what are you going to do with 'em?" asked Clif.

"Leave the draw open and tumble 'em all over into the water—that's what I'm going to do with them."

"But, man, this is wholesale murder."

"I know it is, but you've gone too far now to go back. If you can now, I'll split on you, and then we'll see what'll happen."

"Very well," said Clif, pale with fright, for even his evil nature had not conceived of so terrible a crime; "if I must I must, and there an end of it."

"Yes, and of you, too, if I like," thought Friel to himself. "You're a miserable cuss, and when I've done with you, overboard you go with the rest of 'em."

CHAPTER XXI.

FIENDS AT WORK.

"Is your name Ralph Wright?"

"What do you want of him?"

"Two telegrams."

The question was put to Clif as he stood just outside the station a hour or two after his interview with Friel.

In his pocket were two false telegrams, written on the regular blanks and inclosed in the official envelopes.

He was on his way to find a boy to deliver these, though he wanted first to be sure that Ralph had telegraphed.

"Do you know where they came from?" he asked the lad who he questioned him.

"Brandford. They are answers, I think."

"Let me look at your book."

The boy handed it to him, together with the two envelopes, while Clif pretended to take them under a light, the better to see the directions on them, he substituted the two forged messages for them slipping the two genuine ones in his pocket.

"That's all right," he said, returning the book to the boy and giving him a quarter. "You'll find Ralph Wright just inside. He's friend of mine, and he told me to watch for these telegrams. That what made me stop you."

"All right, sir," answered the boy. "Much obliged to you. Mother and me I'll have a jolly supper to-night out o' this. The p ain't much, and it ain't often I gets extras."

"Is your mother poor, then?" asked Clif, feeling interested in sp of himself.

"Well, she ain't rich. She works for the big tailor shops, but w

she and me earns together ain't very much, and it ain't often we can have a treat, particularly on a cold night."

"Well, I hope you'll have one to-night; so get in with you and deliver your messages."

When the boy had disappeared Clif sauntered away, muttering to himself, with a heartless laugh:

"Much good that 'queer' quarter may do him! I've been trying to pass that all day, but couldn't."

Then turning a corner, so that he would be unobserved, he quickly tore open the two envelopes, and found that the precaution suggested by Friel had not been taken in vain.

The telegrams were from Mr. Merritt, and the father of Jennie Everett, and were in answer to others already sent by Ralph.

They announced that the senders would come upon the night express—Mr. Everett to recover his daughter, and Mr. Merritt to co-operate with the police to secure the arrest of Friel.

The answers that Ralph got were different from these and altered his plans considerably.

"We will go down," Ralph said, after reading the false messages, "and when we meet your father I will return with Mr. Merritt. However, I will see you very shortly."

"How much longer have we to wait?"

"About two hours and a half. Would you like to have something to eat?"

"Yes, if there is any place open at this time."

"There is one just around the corner where we can get a good hot supper. I don't care for it myself, but I thought you might."

"I should, indeed."

"Come along then."

As they went out, Clif, standing in the shadow of the wall, watched them until they entered the restaurant, and then, with a malicious leer upon his face, adjourned to a neighboring saloon to carry out a plan he had just formed.

Let us return to Friel and see how he was carrying out his part of the programme.

Some time after Clif had left him he made his way down the track in the direction of the draw-bridge in company with one of his pals, the night being dark and gloomy, and but few people abroad to meet or molest them.

"We will settle the young feller at the same time," said the outlaw's companion. "He'll go back on us if we don't take care, and if we fix him now there won't be any danger."

"How settle him, Pete?"

"Let the fly cops on him."

"And git ourselves into the same fix?"

"Not a bit of it."

"How'll you do it, then?"

"Haven't you got his statement that he opened the safe and tried to get the blame put on Ralph?"

"Yes."

"And haven't you got his agreement written out straight and plain that he'll pay you so much to get rid of Ralph?"

"Yes."

"If you lose that bit of paper, and a fly cop finds it, won't it throw suspicion on him?"

"To be sure."

"And if you write out a confession signed by him, and giving away all his part in the robbery, and have that found at the same time, wouldn't it be that fly cop's duty to arrest him at once on suspicion?"

"I am inclined to think it would," replied Friel, with a quiet chuckle.

"So am I."

"But how is the fly cop going to find the stuff at the right time?"

"I'll fix that."

"But how will he know where to find the young feller?"

"He'll stay here till after midnight!"

"Well? How do you know that?"

"This way. Write a note, or I will do it, making an appointment for you with the young 'un at a certain place, after the job has been done."

"Well?"

"The fly-cop finds it; I tells the young feller to go there, and then he is nabbed."

"And I don't turn up, and it's too late for them to stop my little racket at the bridge?"

"Exactly."

"You'd better be off now, then, or you'll be late. You've got a good deal to do."

"Right you are. You'll fix the man at the draw?"

Friel answered by a look, and then the two parted, each his separate way, to forge the chain that should be the ruin of innocent and guilty alike.

It was a good walk to the draw-bridge, but the outlaw made the most of his time, and the trains were yet within an hour of their time when he might have been seen advancing toward the little house where the bridge-keeper kept his watch.

"Good-evening," said Friel, stepping inside the door.

"Glad you think it's good; I don't. It's cold and dreary, and looks like rain."

"You're a bit lonely here, I fancy."

"No reason why I shouldn't be."

"Would you mind my keeping you company a bit?"

"You can stay if you like. What do wear your hat so much over your face for? Are you ashamed to have it seen?"

"Not a bit. Your light is a trifle strong, and I've just come in out of the dark."

"Oh, that accounts for it."

"It's right warm here," said Friel, quite carelessly, and with none of the air of a man who wishes to turn the conversation into more agreeable channels.

"It's none too warm for me," growled the bridge-keeper.

"No, nor for me, and if you don't mind I'll take a seat."

He did take a seat forthwith, drawing a stool up by the fire and making himself comfortable.

"Tramping it?" asked the bridge-keeper.

"No—only going on to Bradford to take a job."

"What kind of a job?"

"Machinist."

"So? You don't look like one."

"No; I'm rarely taken for what I am," replied Jack, with a meaning smile, which his companion did not, of course, understand.

"You might be a good one for all that," said the man, after a pause. "Do you smoke?"

"Sometimes."

"Will you make this one of the times?"

"Don't care if I do. A pipe would warm me up."

It was not long before the pipe was going and a lively conversation under way; Friel soon showing the taciturn bridge-keeper that he was no novice at the machinists' trade, which indeed he was not, although he had always perverted a manly employment to bad use.

"Smoking is good enough in its way," said Friel, as he finished his pipe, "but a drink makes it go better."

"It does when one has it, but drink don't come into this box. It's against rules."

"You'd drink it if you had it?"

"You're right, I would."

"How do you like the smell of this?"

Accompanying these words with a quiet chuckle, Friel put a bottle under the man's nose and gave him the full benefit of a strong whiff of the fiery liquor it contained.

"By guns, that's good stuff! Where did you get it?"

"How do you know it's good before you've tasted it?"

"I can tell by the smell; I know good whisky from bad."

"Try a drop of it."

"It's against rules."

"Nonsense; I ain't going to blab on you. Take a drop; it'll do you good."

The man looked up at the clock, and just then were heard the whistles of two approaching trains, one on either side of the river.

Friel gave an anxious look at the clock at the same time, and pressed the bridge-keeper to take a drink.

"The trains are so near now that I reckon I can risk it," said the man, putting the bottle to his lips.

Fatal confidence! The liquor was drugged, and in such a manner that one swallow only created a desire for more until the poor victim dropped senseless to the floor.

"That's all right," muttered Friel. "Now, to finish my work."

With that he darted from the little box and rushed upon the bridge, his eyes fairly blazing with hate and fury.

He had secured the key which unlocked the levers at the center, and in a few moments had pressed his weight upon the bar, which caused the bridge to swing around.

At the instant the two whistles were again heard; this time much nearer than before.

"I must get out of this," muttered Friel, cramming the lever hard down and setting the machinery that turned the bridge in motion.

Then he started to retrace his steps so as not to be left on the bridge, for his work was not yet finished.

As he was about to leap ashore, however, a lithe figure sprang from the buttress upon the bridge right in front of him.

At the instant the moon broke forth from a bank of clouds, revealing to the outlaw the well known features of Railroad Ralph!

CHAPTER XXII.

WEAVING THE WEB.

CLIF stood outside the restaurant where Ralph and Jennie were partaking of their much-needed refreshment, and communed with himself for some minutes.

"I can get rid of them both," he mused; "but after all, why should I hurt Ralph? I shall have nothing to fear from him, and this money is in my possession. He does not know that I have plotted against him, and is not likely to find out. He has done me a good turn, and I don't see why I should kill him for it. 'Tis one matter to throw blame on him to screen myself, and quite another to take his life. He can't do me any harm, and if I can get him out of this I'll do it, providing it leaves me all safe."

In this fallacious manner did he reason, seeming to think that he was perfectly justified in committing any crime but murder, at which even his guilty soul revolted.

He had a certain regard for Ralph, despite all the injuries he had done the latter, and now he began to feel a certain sense of remorse, not for what he had done, but at the thought of compassing the death of one who had been so good a friend to him.

"I am afraid that chattering old woman has been telling Ralph something," he muttered, "and he has already begun to be suspicious

of me. Now that I want to do him a good turn, I am afraid that I shall be balked.

"If I tell him not to take that train, he will be sure to do it and lose his life, or, if he doesn't take it, he won't send the girl by it, and up goes my chance of a fortune."

"If I allow matters to go on, they will be married, and I lose all, when by a clever stroke now I can step into a fortune by virtue of my relationship to Jennie Everett. I am not going to let the money slip, but Ralph must be spared."

"How am I going to bring it about? I must get him off on some wild-goose chase, and detain him until too late to catch the train. He can't inherit the whole fortune unless he marries, though he will get some of it anyhow. I shall see that he doesn't catch that train. I can't bear to think of having his blood upon my head."

Had Clif known all the provisions in regard to the property, having found only a portion of the papers relating to it in the safe which he had broken open, he would not have been so ready to spare his friend's life.

He comforted himself, however, with the idea that he was not as bad as he might be, and was doing Ralph a service, when, had he known all the truth, he would have been more eager to kill Ralph and get possession of everything.

He was but the instrument of fate, however, for it was not written that Ralph should die that night, and, though he fancied himself to be a voluntary agent in the matter, was nothing more but an unconscious tool in the hands of a power greater than any earthly influence.

Having once conceived the idea of saving Ralph, he began to devise means to put it into execution; not an easy task, by the way, as he dared not approach Ralph himself, but must act through others.

He did not know how much Ralph knew, and would, therefore, have to be cautious; choosing, therefore, the wisest plan, and resolving not to see Ralph at all.

After thinking over several plans, he left the place hurriedly, having determined to seek the aid of Ned, Friel's pal, the man being at that hour, as he knew, in the city.

He had gone about a quarter of a mile, when he suddenly came upon Tom, the messenger-boy, the same lad that Ralph had said was so much attached to him because he made him do what was right.

"Hallo, Clif," said this lad, irreverently. "Haven't seen you for a long time. Where've you been?"

"Ou my vacation, you young scamp. What are you doing out at this time of night?"

"I'm a telegraph boy now. Left the road. Me and old Merritt couldn't get along together."

"Oh, you couldn't!"

"No, he was too frumpish for me. Besides, he wouldn't trust Ralph Wright, and I couldn't stand that, you know."

"You are very fond of Ralph?"

"'Cause he hasn't any nonsense about him. I'd like you better if you didn't have so much."

"You're a plain-spoken young imp, I must say."

"I was born so, and can't help it. Have you got a light? I don't get a chance to smoke in office hours, or at my boarding-house, and so have to do it on the street."

"You smoke, a little snip like you! It's ridiculous."

"Oh! Is it, indeed?" said Tom, with mock gravity. "You don't do ridiculous things, do you? I say, give me a light, won't you?"

"Are you off duty now?"

"Yes, and I've got my pipe already loaded. I can get a jolly good smoke before I reach the old woman's."

"Would you mind delivering a message for me if I give you a cigar instead of your pipe?"

"Would I mind it? You bet I wouldn't! But I say!"

"Well!"

"I won't smoke the weed until Sunday, when I can cut a shine on York street with it and make all the fellers jealous. I'll save it and smoke my pipe now."

"All right; do as you please. Come into Joyce's and wait till I write the note."

They passed in through the door of a sort of half tavern and entered a private room, Clif speaking to the proprietor on the way.

Giving the precocious youth the wherewithal to light his short pipe, and a full-flavored Havana beside, Clif sat down and wrote the following note to Ralph:

"RALPH WRIGHT, SIR:—We have now in our custody a man called Ned, an accomplice of Jack Friel's, and desiring to secure all the evidence possible before to-morrow, would respectfully request that you step around to our office at once, where you will be detained but a few minutes. We give you our word that your liberty will not be interfered with, as you may see by the inclosed note. Respectfully,

"JOHN JONES, Chief of Police."

After writing this, Clif took a telegraph blank from his pocket, and wrote upon it the following:

"JONES, Chief of Police, Blanktown:

"Ralph Wright will give you what information you require. He is reliable, despite the ugly rumors concerning him. Please allow him perfect liberty. You will now find him in the depot."

"MERRITT, Supt."

While Clif had been writing the above, Tom was so busy smoking that he did not notice what the other was doing, and after inclosing both papers in a sealed envelope, he called the lad and said:

"Leave this note for Ralph at the station, and then get home, or

you'll have to sleep on a door-step all night. Here's the cigar I promised you, and now you just hook it!"

Chuckles at the idea that the young fellow had forgotten all about the first cigar, Tom collared the note and the second one and did "hook it" most lively, for fear that Clif might discover his mistake and call him back.

Clif knew that he was sure of his game now, however, and he allowed the lad to think he had been unusually clever, when, in fact, the young prig had been very neatly duped.

Clif knew very well that Ralph would not be at the depot, and that Tom could not, therefore, tell him who had sent the note, which Ralph would, of course, think had been left for him by a messenger.

As Clif presumed, he was not yet returned when Tom entered the depot, and not seeing Ralph, gave the note to a porter, instructing him to give it to the young engineer on his return.

The man, knowing Tom to be a messenger, took charge of themissive and promised to deliver it as soon as Ralph came in, and the boy, wishing to continue his smoke, which he could not do in the station, departed for his lodgings, quite satisfied that it was all right.

He had not thought to say from whom the note had come, and the man had not asked him, knowing him to be in the employ of the telegraph company, so that, unconsciously, the two helped to weave more closely the web that was being drawn around poor Ralph.

Now Clif had really no intention, at first, of doing Ralph any more harm than making him miss the midnight train in order to save his life, but one's good intentions are not always carried out, as was the case in this instance.

When Tom had departed, Clif determined to wait a while before carrying out the rest of his plan, but growing tired of staying in the tavern, he went out upon the street.

As he did so, a man approached him, and said:

"What's the racket now, young feller? Sent Ralph off on a wild goose chase, have you? That was well done, but you've got to change your plans a bit."

The man was Ned, who had again escaped death as if by a miracle, and was as ready as ever to enter into any scheme of mischief.

"What do you mean?" asked Clif, flushing.

"That I listened and heard all your racket. The boss of this place is a pal o' mine. Now I'll tell you what we'll do."

"Well?"

"You don't want Ralph to go by that train?"

"No."

"That's all right. I don't want him to either, 'cause I want to kill him myself."

"He must be spared."

"No, he mustn't!" hissed Ned. "Do you know that he can give us all away—you with the rest?"

"He would not."

"That's where you're off your reckonin'. He'll give you away before any one else, so as to shield himself."

"It's a lie!"

"Perhaps it is, but don't say nothin' till you read this message what he sent to Merritt. One of the operators give it to me. He's a pal of mine."

With this, Ned produced a crumpled paper and handed it to Clif, who took it to the light and read it with great interest.

"Why, this is the original message," he cried, in an excited tone. "I know Ralph's handwriting."

"To be sure it is," responded Ned, with a chuckle. "I got it so as to show you I wasn't lying."

"This thing settles it," answered Clif. "What do you propose to do?"

The paper, which had decided Clif to sacrifice Ralph after all, was a clever forgery, as the reader does not need to be told, and read thus:

"MR. MERRITT,—Clif Wayne is the real thief, and has been in league with Friel all along. He is in Blanktown, and could easily be arrested to-night. I will help you do it." RALPH."

It was but a part of Friel's plan against Clif to make him think that Ralph had betrayed him, and the outlaw's pal, Pete, had just finished this piece of work, intrusting Ned with it, while he himself went about other matters.

"What do you mean to do?" repeated Clif.

"Send him from the station-house up to Jones' place, or at least make him think he's going there."

"Where will he go then?"

"To a den of ours, where I will take good care he does not get away."

"He will never escape if he gets into your hands."

"You're right."

"I did not think he would betray me, but this convinces me, and I wouldn't spare him now if he went on his knees."

"No more you wouldn't. Be off with you now, and take care of the girl while I work up this case."

"And I'll see you again—"

"When Old Nick opens his court in the morning."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FLAW IN THE MESHES.

WHEN Ralph and Jennie had finished their supper, they returned to the depot, where our hero found the forged message awaiting him.

He read it over carefully, together with the inclosure, and after deliberating a few moments, said:

"Would you mind waiting here while I go out upon a little matter of business? I will return before the train starts."

"Is it important?"

"Quite."

"Then go by all means. I shall be comfortable here."

"I will get the tickets now and thus save time. Don't go away until I return."

"I will not."

"It won't take me more than an hour, and that will give us time enough," he said, after getting the tickets. "So compose yourself until I get back."

Then he went to the address given, where he found a man in uniform pacing up and down before the door.

"What is your business, sir?" asked this man, as Ralph attempted to enter.

"I wish to see the chief."

"What about?"

"Private matters."

"Did he send for you?"

"Yes."

"You are Ralph Wright?"

"The same."

"He has gone home, but he left word for you to go there at once."

"Where does he live?"

"Here is his address on a card. He said for me to give it to you when you came."

The man then handed Ralph a card, on which was written an address in a quarter of the city which did not have a very good reputation.

Ralph was too excited to think much of this circumstance, however, and thrusting the card in his pocket, he hurried away after thanking the man for his attention.

He had scarcely disappeared in the distance, before the man himself abandoned his post and went off, muttering to himself:

"Cleverly done, that. Aha. It takes Pete to hoodwink these young fellows. Ned will take care of this one, and now I'll go off and settle the other."

Meantime Ralph hurried away, and after taking several wrong turnings in his excitement, thereby losing a good half hour, he arrived at his destination.

He had glanced at his watch occasionally on the way, however, and seeing that he still had sufficient time, did not worry himself over the lost minutes, trusting to get through in ample time.

There was a light burning in the house, and seizing the heavy iron knocker he made the street ring with its echoes.

The door was opened instantly, and a voice from out of the darkness, there being no light in the passage, said gruffly:

"What's wanted at this time of night?"

"I want to see the chief of police."

"All right. Come in."

Ralph entered and advanced a few paces, when the door was suddenly slammed behind him.

"It's the wind," said the voice. "I don't see why Mr. Jones wants to live in such a breezy place. Come right ahead; you won't go wrong."

Ralph did go wrong, for all this assurance, however, for as he reached the end of the passage a hidden door was opened behind him at the same time that the one in front was thrown aside, and in an instant he was pushed into a room, where he saw no less a person than the outlaw Ned glaring at him with the utmost fierceness.

"Trapped again!" laughed the man, as the door was shut, leaving them alone.

"What does this mean?" demanded Ralph.

"That you are not as smart as you think, and that I am going to kill you."

"Whose work is this?"

"Your pretended friend's."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Clif Wayne. You were soft to trust him."

"He did not send me here."

"It was his work all the same."

At that moment a clock outside struck the three-quarters.

"Do you know what time that is?" asked Ned.

"Quarter to eleven."

"And an hour on top of that. Your watch has been fixed, my boy. You thought you had more time, didn't you? You'll miss the train now, and your precious friend. We'll carry away the prize."

"Never!" cried Ralph, making a sudden onslaught upon the robber and throwing him upon the floor.

His knife fell from his grasp, and seizing this, Ralph forced his head back against the hard boards, and planting his knee firmly upon the villain's chest, held the glittering weapon poised above him.

Ned had sent away all his companions, reckoning upon an easy victory over Ralph, and he quickly realized his desperate strait.

The suddenness of the attack had so completely taken him by surprise that he was utterly in Ralph's power, unable to move hand or foot, and with death staring him in the face.

For an instant Ralph held the knife poised above the villain's throat, and then looking him straight in the face, said:

"I could kill you if I chose!"

Ned said nothing, giving himself up for lost.

Ralph did not strike, however, but retaining the weapon, arose to his feet, and asked:

"Is what you said true?"

"About the train?"

"Yes."

"As true as preaching."

"Let me out and I will spare your life."

"What?" replied Ned, in amazement.

"I shall gain nothing by killing you. I have work to do of more importance."

Ned looked at the speaker a few moments, and then, with visible emotion, blurted out:

"You're the squarest young fellow I ever met, and I'll give you the whole thing straight."

"What do you mean?"

"Clif Wayne has betrayed you. The midnight express will be wrecked, and your sweetheart, her father, old Merritt, and everybody else killed."

"Horror!"

"There's no time to lose, but give me a few minutes more. You've been square with me, and I'll let out the whole business."

"For God's sake hasten."

"Clif Wayne has been agin ye all along. He put your things in the safe-room; he gave you away to Jack; he told Jack to kill the fellow you knocked down-stairs after breaking jail; he forged telegrams and sent you off on a wrong scent, and now he has tried to have you murdered."

"The villain!"

"Tain't altogether his fault, but he's done enough without our helping him to send him to the old boy a dozen times. Run now or you'll be too late."

"What for?"

"To save the train. If you don't reach the drawbridge first you'll hear of something to-morrow."

"Promise me one thing, Ned," said Ralph, as the man opened the door for him.

"What is it?"

"That you will use the life I have given you for nobler purposes than you have formerly done."

"I will, so help me Heaven!"

"Then good-night."

"Stop! Take the first turning on your right and follow it. You will save a mile that way."

"I will do it."

Then he was off like a shot, while Ned stood there, the big tears coursing down his hardened features, his bosom heaving, and his breath coming in short gasps.

"I never heard the like of that before," he at length whispered, as if afraid to speak aloud.

"I've tried to take that young fellow's life a dozen times, and now, when he gets me dead to rights and in a hole where he could end me with one turn of his wrist, he lets up on me and tells me to live a better life!

"Jack Friel would never do a thing like that, and even his own mother turns on him and brands him like a felon."

"I tell you, this sort of life don't pay, and if I have half a chance I'll go to Australia or Africa and start afresh; I'll do it this very night."

With that he dashed the tears from his eyes, left the house and set out for the East, traveling all night and all the next day, never once stopping for rest or refreshment, or to inquire the news, but pushing on as if afraid to trust himself until his determination should have taken full possession of him.

Ralph had but a vague idea of the danger that threatened, but knowing that her he loved was in great peril, he sped along the dark and deserted streets with the swiftness of the wind itself, while a prayer arose involuntarily to his lips that he might yet be in time.

He was hurrying on when a church clock struck the hour of midnight, each note seeming to thrill his very soul.

"The train has left the station," he muttered. "Every moment now is precious. God grant that I may be in time to save it."

Meanwhile Clif had been at work drawing the meshes tighter around his victims, little knowing that he too was in danger.

After Ralph had been away quite a while he went to Jennie in the station and said:

"Ralph has been detained longer than he supposed he would be, and even now he may not catch the train."

"Oh, dear, what shall I do?" said Jennie, in distress.

"You wouldn't be afraid to go on the train alone?"

"I should not like to."

"I will go with you as far as the junction, where your father is waiting."

"Will you? That is kind of you."

"Not at all. If you are pleased to accept my escort, I am delighted to give it."

"Providing Ralph does not return," she answered with charming naivete.

"Oh, to be sure," he returned, with a laugh, which concealed his real feelings.

Time passed, and the train being made up, Clif procured a seat for Jennie, and then left her for a few minutes, as he said, in order to look out for Ralph.

The outlaws had been at work meanwhile, though matters were turning in a way that they had not intended, owing to Ned's sudden disappearance.

Pete had sent a letter to the chief of police, detailing all Clif's

villainy, but saying nothing of the intention to wreck the train, and an officer was at that very moment in the station awaiting Clif's appearance.

The young man left the cars and was hurrying away, when the detective, seeing that he had no intention of taking the train, quickly intercepted him and said:

"I arrest you for the robbery of the Southeastern Company's safe last Thursday night."

Clif turned pale and gasped:

"Has Friel blown, then?"

"You'll know later. Come along, the train is about to start. If you don't I shall have to lock you up in jail all night."

"My God! don't take me by this train," pleaded Clif, knowing what would be his fate.

"Do you want to stay in jail then?"

"No, no, but—"

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor.

The detective said no more, but clapping a pair of handcuffs on the young man's wrists, dragged him into a car and pushed him into a seat by the window as the train swept out of the station.

"I have compassed my own destruction," muttered the wretched young man as the speed increased. "In five minutes we shall reach the draw. Little did I think when I planned this horrible deed that I was preparing the means for my own death."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CALLED TO AN ACCOUNT.

"So, Jack Friel, we meet in the very nick!" cried Ralph, as he leaped upon the drawbridge.

He had made the best of the short time allowed him, Ned's condition having saved him a wide detour, and had reached the draw at the exact moment that Friel had started to return.

He saw it begin to swing around, and knew that there was no time to lose, as both trains could even then be heard approaching.

He gave one glance into the bridge-keeper's box, and saw that there was no hope to be expected from that quarter, but that the safety of many valuable lives must depend upon his own efforts alone.

There was yet time to spring upon the draw before it swung out, and making the leap, he landed squarely in front of Friel as the latter was leaving.

The moon had just emerged from the thick clouds which had obscured it, and Ralph's face and form were plainly revealed to the outlaw, who started back in alarm.

"Curse the stupid young wretch," he hissed, "he has let his victim escape. If he lives we are all lost."

"Villain!" cried Ralph, "what new deviltry is this? Do you not know—"

"That the midnight expresses are due here at this very minute, nearly, and that with the draw open they will be wrecked. I do know it and I know who are aboard as well."

"You shall not succeed in your diabolical schemes."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I will!"

As Ralph uttered these words he sprang at Friel, but the latter eluded him and made for the center of the bridge, laughing exultingly.

Toot-toot!

The trains, approaching the draw on either side, have given signals and in a few minutes will be rushing headlong to destruction.

Something must be done, and quickly too, or a frightful catastrophe will occur, there being no one to give warning.

Ralph has never swerved from his duty, no matter how terrible the trial, and he now resolves to do his utmost, come what may.

Provided he can overpower Friel, there is yet time for him to swing the drawback into place, and prevent an accident.

The outlaw is wily, however, and will elude him, so as to create delay and waste the precious moments, for every one of which Ralph would give a fortune.

He must be swift and sure, or all is lost, and with this thought in his mind, he sprungs after the villain and overtakes him at the middle of the draw.

His scarred face is made more ghastly by the pale light which falls upon it, and there is a frightened look in it now, as if he felt his end approaching, which is terrible to see.

He is desperate, moreover, and at bay, for even if the accident is not prevented, he has but small chance of escaping Ralph's vengeance.

He seems to feel this and to know that now one of them must die, that this is to be the decisive struggle, and that either one or the other, and perhaps both, will never see the light of another day.

He wishes to avoid a struggle, if possible, until the trains have been wrecked, so as to have the grim satisfaction of knowing that he has caused the death of others, even if he is to die himself.

Therefore he seeks to elude Ralph as long as he can, chuckling at the lad's eagerness, and listening anxiously for the nearer approach of the imperiled trains.

Ralph is fairly mad with anxiety, and leaping from tie to tie he throws himself upon Friel before the latter can get away, and the struggle begins.

Ralph cares more to get rid of his opponent than to kill him, and he therefore directs all his energies towards throwing the outlaw from the draw, so as to be able to work unmolested.

Whatever he does must be done quickly, as the time is getting woefully short, and even now may not suffice.

He can see the head-lights of both engines glaring upon him, hear the roar and rattle, and almost feel the bridge tremble with the vibration imparted to the air by the movements of the coming monsters.

All depends upon the work of an instant, and with bated breath and throbbing heart, he throws all his strength into one terrible effort.

He lifts the outlaw from his feet, though the man is no mean load, staggers with him to the edge of the draw, and hurls him headlong into the stream.

The man utters a piercing shriek, and tries to seize Ralph and drag him over, hoping even yet to frustrate the daring fellow.

He beats the air wildly with his hands, however, and whirls through space, leaving Ralph unharmed.

Aye, the lad is safe enough, but what of the lives he has sworn to protect?

Without bestowing a single thought upon the outlaw, Ralph rushed to the lever, and exerting all his strength, set in motion the machinery which turned the bridge.

The latter was now wide open, extending up and down the stream, but under Ralph's exertions it began to move rapidly into its place.

It was well that everything was in good condition, for otherwise the catastrophe might not, even then have been averted.

Its movements were rapid, however, and scarce a minute elapsed from the moment Ralph touched the lever, before it had swung half way to its position.

He may yet be too late, for the trains are frightfully near, and no one is nigh to give warning of the danger.

Click!

It is in its proper place, and at that instant the trains are within ten feet of either end.

A hasty glance convinces Ralph that they are safe, and thus a new peril threatens.

The two trains cross simultaneously, and leave no room for anything but themselves.

There is but a narrow plank for him to stand upon while the trains are crossing, and this will afford but a precarious position.

He will be certain to be jolted off if he remains, and yet there is nothing else to support him.

If he keeps the track he will be killed, and if he jumps he runs the risk of being drowned, as the current below is swift and strong, full of treacherous eddies and sunken rocks, many lives having already been lost there.

From both sides come the trains, and at the same time leaving him apparently no alternative but death.

Suddenly he sees a way out of his dilemma, though it is a desperate expedient, and he instantly puts it into execution.

Dropping between the two tracks, he seizes the crossbeam of heavy oak by both hands and hangs suspended while the engines and cars go thundering by over his head.

Smoke and steam, sparks and dust fall all around him, but, unheeding these, he clings tenaciously to his support, though it seems more than once as if he would be shaken off, and never relaxes his grasp until the last car has passed, and the rails have ceased to vibrate.

"That was a lucky escape," he muttered, as he drew himself up and sat on the plank between the rails. "I wonder how Friel came out."

The sky had become overcast again, and Ralph could see nothing distinctly, the waters being black and surging beneath him, and a solitary light here and there all that told of the presence of the city.

It was some time before he felt strong enough to walk across the bridge without fear of falling, and even then the time occupied in crossing was considerable, so that when he at last reached the center of the city where he could find a telegraph office the day was beginning to break.

There was nothing to be done except find a place to rest, and this was soon accomplished, our hero falling asleep as soon as he touched the pillow, and never waking until the middle of the forenoon.

Then he went out and made inquiries at the station whether Mr. Merritt had been heard from, receiving answer that the gentleman had been looking for him and had returned to Brandford.

Ralph at once telegraphed that he would come on immediately, and then, finding that he would be obliged to wait an hour, strolled off towards the river.

As he neared the bank he saw a crowd collected at a certain point, and feeling a curiosity to know what should occasion such a gathering, quickened his pace.

"What's up?" he inquired of a man whom he met returning from the place.

"Man drowned. They say he must have fallen in somewhere near the bridge. He's badly cut up."

"Does any one know him?"

"Not that I know of."

Ralph pressed forward, and making his way through the crowd, forced his way to the front.

There, lying upon the cold ground, was the body of a man wet and stained with river mud, the clothing disordered, the hair matted and clotched with blood, and on the forehead, pale and cold, a deep scar as from a branding iron.

It was the body of Jack Friel, the outlaw, called to his last account, upon whom the crowd gazed so piteously, and which the waters had cast up.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

"It is Jack Friel," said Ralph. "He would have wrecked the midnight express last night, and I threw him off!"

A murmur arose at these words, and Ralph might have suffered silence had not an officer stepped up, and said to him:

"You had better get away, for I think that some of Friel's friends are here. You can make a statement, if you wish. The coroner has been already notified, and the body will be taken away shortly."

At that moment there was a commotion in the crowd, and an old woman made her way toward the body, and threw herself upon it.

It was old Meg, the mother of the outlaw.

"So you have come to your death at last, have you?" she cried. "Lucky for you that the hangman has been cheated out of a job. You always did go against honest men."

"Who is this?" asked the officer.

"His mother."

Old Meg heard the words and looked up quickly.

"So you are safe, Ralph Wright, or Ralph Shepton, are you?" she said. "I am glad of it! How did this villain come to his death?" Ralph was about to answer when the coroner's deputy arrived, and the woman was pushed aside.

Ralph and the officer quickly made their way from the place, and the crowd dispersed, some following the body to the coroner's and others going about their business, if they had any to attend to.

Ralph went to the office of the chief of police and made a statement which was taken down, Mr. Jones saying that the lad might possibly be required to make another at some later day, and asking him for his address, which was given.

Ralph then went to the station, having just time to catch his train, and in a few minutes he was whirling away towards Bradford.

When Clif became aware that he was upon the doomed train, his terror was so great that for some moments he was unable to speak a word.

"Stop the train," he then cried, "or all is lost!"

"And have a horde of your pals coming swarming in upon us," answered the detective. "I guess not."

"But I tell you that—"

"If you don't keep quiet, I shall have to gag you or take you into the baggage car."

Clif became quiet then, more from desperation than anything else, and mused to himself:

"I shall escape disgrace, at all events, and shall not perish alone."

"Ralph has betrayed me," he continued, "and if he is killed by that villain Ned it will serve him just right. I did not think he would be so base."

He seemed to forget his own baseness, however, selfish and cruel as he was, but this was not for long, as presently the thought of his approaching death sobered him, and he whispered to the detective:

"I will tell you all, for there is no hope for me now."

Then he confessed the whole thing, the detective taking notes as he proceeded, and omitting nothing.

When he had concluded, Clif suddenly gazed out of the window and said, in a state of great excitement:

"Have we crossed the bridge?"

"We have crossed several of them. Which do you mean?"

"The draw over Muddy Run."

"Long ago. It was soon after you began to tell me this story."

"And the other train passed us?"

"Yes."

"And we are safe?"

"Don't you see that we are? Why do you ask such questions?"

Clif had said nothing about the intention of wrecking the train, and now, knowing that for some reason the plan must have failed, said:

"Was Friel arrested to-night?"

"No."

"Or any of his pals?"

"No."

Then he laughed and said hysterically:

"That's a pretty story I've told you, isn't it? There's not a word of truth in the whole thing."

"We'll settle that when we get to Bradford," answered the other, coldly.

"But I tell you there isn't, and I demand to be released."

"You'll have to make that demand before a magistrate. I have a right to arrest you on suspicion, and what you have told me only makes the matter worse."

"But that was all a lie."

"Perhaps it was," retorted the man, looking Clif square in the face, the young man quailing before that steady gaze.

"To be sure it was."

"You can't fool me, youngster," was the cool retort. "I am an old hand at this business, and I know truth from lies."

"Confound it," muttered Clif, under his breath, "I've given myself dead away, when, if I had kept my mouth shut, it would have been all right."

He remained silent for the remainder of the journey, and when he arrived at Bradford was taken to the Court House, where he was detained in a waiting-room instead of being put in a cell.

He was committed for examination, upon the detective's testimony, and late in the afternoon was set free upon obtaining heavy bail.

Meanwhile the news of Friel's death had been received, and Mr. Merritt had met Ralph, treating him with the utmost cordiality.

As Clif was leaving the court-house they entered it, and the young man said, hotly:

"I didn't think you would go back on me, Ralph. You swore that you would say nothing, and you set the detectives upon me."

"You are mistaken. I have said nothing."

"You told Ned that—"

"I told Ned? Why, it was Ned himself that told me about your—Well, never mind," he added hastily, seeing Mr. Merritt looking at him.

"I know all now, Ralph," the superintendent declared, kindly. "You have kept your word, although it has cost you so much."

"But Friel is dead, is he?" said Clif, turning away. "Then I am safe, and no one can appear against me."

"Except your own confession," said the detective, approaching.

Clif flushed deeply and hurried away, while Mr. Merritt said to our hero:

"Ralph, all is clear now. You will forgive me my unjust suspicions?"

"Freely."

"And you will resume your place on the road?"

"If you wish it."

"I can do better by him than that," said Mr. Everett, the father of Jennie, who at that moment came up.

"Indeed!"

"Yes. I owe him many obligations upon my daughter's account, and I propose to take him into the business with me. I shall need an honest man to look after things when I am gone."

"What do you say, Ralph?" asked the superintendent.

"I think I shall have to oblige both, so until the year is out I will stay on the road, and after that go with Mr. Everett. The offer is such a good one that I feel I ought not to refuse."

"I am satisfied," replied Mr. Everett.

"And so am I," added Mr. Merritt.

This arrangement was entered into accordingly, and at the end of a couple of years Ralph was admitted to partnership with Mr. Everett, having then come of age.

He had been married to Jennie previous to that time by a few weeks, and their happiness seemed completely assured.

Clif Wayne never appeared for trial, having forfeited his bonds and disappeared, and from that day nothing was ever heard of him, his whereabouts being a matter of total uncertainty.

The outlaw Ned succeeded in making his way unmolested to the sea-coast, where he obtained a position on a ship bound to Australia.

He remained in that country many years, and Ralph heard nothing of him until quite recently, when he received a letter in which the man recounted the changes that had taken place in his life, and expressed a hope that he might some day see the one who had spared him for better days.

He was the owner of a large sheep-farm, and by strict attention to business had acquired a considerable fortune, having married well, and being the father of three fine daughters and a son, his oldest child, whom he had christened Ralph.

Jennie laughed when her husband told her this, but he replied that it was better to name an outlaw's child after an honest man than to give an honest child the name of an outlaw, and Jennie agreed.

Ralph has never seen Ned since that eventful night, but he is satisfied with the man's repentance, and feels assured that his altered life is the reward for his own leniency, and that Ned alive and honest is worth a dozen of Ned dead and a criminal.

Jack Friel was buried in Potters Field, and his old mother disappeared soon afterward, never to be seen again; so that whether she is dead or alive still remains a mystery.

There was no trouble in proving Ralph's claim to the property, and as he became Jennie's husband before she arrived at her majority, the money was preserved to them, and, with what Ralph already had, made a tidy fortune.

And that is all I have to say of Railroad Ralph, having related the whole story of his trials and triumphs; and so, having finished my task, I will take leave of my readers for the present, until I overhaul my old note-books and determine what one of my old friends shall next have his adventures made known to the public.

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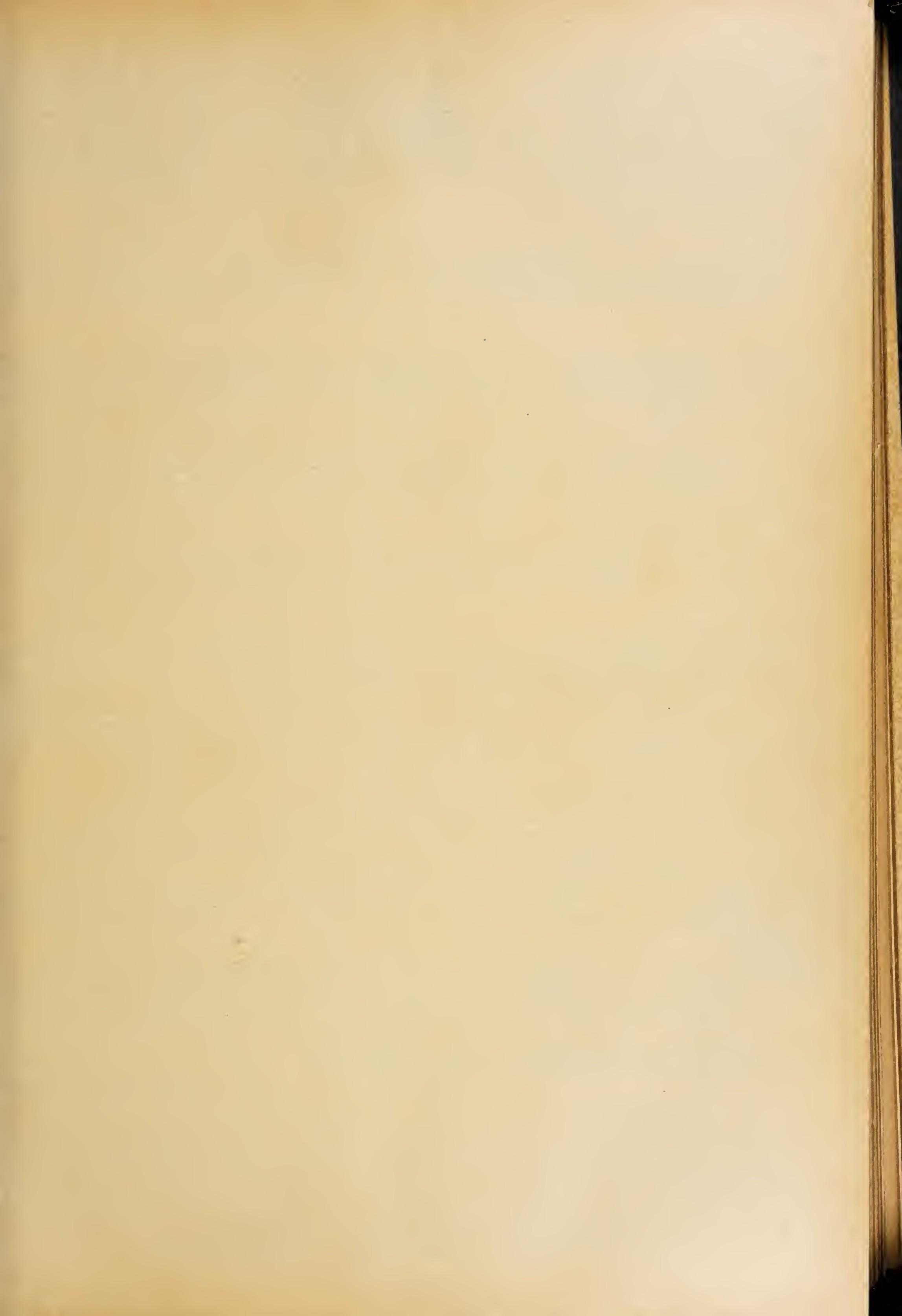
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